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PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION: CONSERVATISM AND LIBERALISM

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Philosophy and education are interlinked as the common problems that arose out of these two branches connected in each and every aspect. The nature of man, the domination of the spirit over matter or body or vice versa, the values, the religion, the free will etc., are highly linked with educational policies. That was the result of so many 'isms' in philosophy of education propounded by so many thinkers either in the Western countries or Eastern countries. There was difference of opinions among various thinkers in the same country. There were so many controversies and unsolved problems in philosophy of education as there were no common ideas among these thinkers. But when some of the ideas which propagate common ideas are brought together, there will be a synthesis of these ideas, which leads any national educational system in a progressive way. Even this synthesis should depend on the traditions of a particular country.

There are values in both life and education. Life cannot be without proper values. Man has a phenomenal existence. Existential philosophers give importance to phenomenal existence. In the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre we find the importance to worldly existence. Plato in his dialogue tells that there is life hereafter. He describes heaven which glitters like gold and appears whiter than snow. Above all Plato believed in the immortality of the human soul. Modern thinkers hold that there is what is called regeneration of soul. Religions like Hinduism and Christianity speak of an after-life. These religions describe earthly existence and life in heaven and in hell. We are concerned with values. Material values, spiritual values, and religious values influence life and education.

The ancient educational thinkers felt that a healthy society was not possible without educated individuals. They framed educational set up carefully and wisely aiming at the harmonious development of the multiple dimensions of the human personality. In this system understanding oneself (self-knowledge) is as important as understanding the world. According to them without a deep understanding of one's relationship with nature, with ideas, with fellow human beings, with society, and a deep respect for all life, one is not really educated.



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Another unique feature of this educational system is that it aims at creating a mind that is both scientific and spiritual at the same time, one that is enquiring, precise, rational and skeptical but at the same time has sense of beauty, wonder, aesthetics, sensitivity, humility, and an awareness of the limitations of the intellect. It also aims at developing a mind, which is rational, flexible and not dogmatic, open to change and not irrationally attached to an opinion or belief should. In this system of education both scientific and spiritual quests are the complementary quests, one for the discovery of the order that manifests itself in the outer world of matter, energy, space and time and the other for discovering order (peace, harmony, virtue) in the inner world of human consciousness. Actually they are both quests for truth into two complementary aspects of a single reality which is composed of both matter and consciousness.

“asato ma sadgamaya; tamaso ma jyotirgamaya; mrityorma amritam gamaya”¹

(Lead me from falsehood to truth; Lead me from darkness to light; Lead me from death to immortality)

For ancient thinkers, the ideals of truth, light and immortality constituted a triune unity, each subsisting in the other. The students were not allowed to forget that they had within them a higher self beyond their little personal ego, and that numerous ways and disciplines were provided by which they could realize the higher self. The holistic education of ancient India involves a harmonious blending of the knowledge of the outer world (*avidya*) and that of the inner-world (*vidya*). The former, as it were, enables a man to keep his body and soul together and the later, i.e. *vidya*, the wisdom, leads him to immortality, freedom from all sufferings of the world of change.

It may be noted here that the Lord *Buddha* preached middle path which lies between the two extremes, viz, gross sensualism or vile pleasure-seeking on the one hand and the extreme asceticism or the severest self-mortification on the other hand. *Buddha* laid stress on purity of conduct, truthfulness, love and benevolence, obedience to parents and respect for the elders, non-drinking, charity and kindness and mercy to all living beings. *Ahimsa*, non-violence towards life is recognized as an integral principle of his practical morality. The spirit of

¹ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 1.3.28.



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Buddhism was very liberal and accommodating. These values have become very essential for survival of human race in the present day situation.

The ancient educational thinkers developed another unique concept viz. the “*Puruṣartahs*”. *Puruṣartha* is translated to mean a human goal, an object of desire, consciously pursued. This significant concept of development upholds the legitimacy of man’s desire for economic security (*artha*) and sensuous aesthetic satisfaction (*kāma*) and spiritual welfare (*mokṣa*).

Ancient Indians also developed the concept of *Yoga* for disciplining the mind and the body. Without the practice of the principles of *yama* and *niyama*, which lay the firm foundation for building character, there cannot be an integrated personality. In *Yoga Śāstra* the "Right Living" is based on *yama* and *niyama*, very simple ethical disciplines of "dos and don'ts". Sage *Patanjali* in his authoritative Treatise *Yoga Sūtras* builds his entire Eight-fold path of *Yoga* on the foundation of *yama* and *niyama*. Practice of *āsanas* without *yama* and *niyama* is mere acrobatics. Discipline does not arise from one's own mind. It has to be learned from outside. The word *Yama* can be broadly translated as "Self Restraints".

Indian philosophy of education is fundamentally based upon the ancient Indian idea that one *Brahman* manifests in all the diversity of society and nature. Therefore, they insisted upon equality of opportunity for all in the field of education. This revivalism is also explicit in the patriotic and nationalist utterances of Gandhi sought to revive the ancient Indian moral values of truth and non-violence in every field of life. Gandhi said:

“Your education, if it is a vital thing, must shed its fragrance in your surroundings. You must devote a certain portion of your time daily to serving the people around in a practical manner. You must, therefore, be prepared to take the spade, the broomstick and basket. You must become voluntary scavengers of this holy place. That would be the richest part of your education, not learning by heart literary thesis.”²

Contemporary Indian education should follow the ancient Indian ideals, values and models of social relationships, curricula, teacher-taught- relationship, methods of teaching, etc. What requires change are the means of education. The modern means of education, the audio-visual instruments, the apparatus of modern

² Gandhi, M.K., *Young India*, 14-11-29.



science should be borrowed every where, particularly in the field of education of science and technology. Revivalism only craves for ancient ideals and values. It accepts modern means and mechanisms.

Radhakrishnan was an advocate of ancient Indian *Vedānta* philosophy. He was an idealist philosopher. He defined philosophy as a combination of reflection and intuition. Radhakrishnan's aim of philosophy is to search that synthesis which may include all the aspects of creation. While Jawaharlal Nehru openly and unconditionally support rationalism and Radhakrishnan follow the ancient tradition according to which while aims and ideals, goals and values are intuitive, the means are supplied by reason. In India reason has never been taken as an opponent of intuition. The fields of intuition and reason have been clearly defined and none of the two is allowed to transgress another's field. Thus in the field of educational values, for example, intuition is the primary means while reason has to follow the dictates of intuition. Contrary to the western rationalism which makes reason a slave of passions, the Indian thinkers make it subordinate to intuition; only and always superior to passions.

The primary function of reason in this country has been to control the infra-rational passions and tendencies. Up to the mental level reason is the highest law but as one rises above mind reason has to bow its head and acquiesce. Thus the rationalist trend in contemporary Indian philosophy of education is a part of the fundamental integral approach. In the educational philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru finds a tendency towards western type of rationalism and the value of intuition and other sources of human knowledge.

Jawaharlal Nehru and Manabendra Nath Roy support naturalistic humanism, borrowed from the West, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan follow the Indian sort of humanism coming from the ancient *Vedas*, the *Upaniṣads*, and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. There is no essential difference between the Western and Indian humanism, the later is represented by the traditionalist group of Indian philosophers of education. Therefore, it is their humanism which forms the essential element of Indian philosophy of education. Nehru explained the social objectives of education in human development.

“When we consider the whole subject of education we have to think in terms of the state and the society we are aiming at; we have to train our people to that end; we have to decide what our citizens should be like



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and what their occupations should be . . . We have to produce harmony and equilibrium in their private and social and public life.”³

Contemporary Indian philosophers of education Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi and Dayananda depict an integral approach in philosophy. According to Sri Aurobindo:

“The work of philosophy is to arrange the data given by the various means of knowledge, excluding none, and put them into a synthetic relation to one truth, the one supreme and universal reality.”⁴

These philosophers believe in a monistic, idealistic, and integral philosophy. There is one Spirit underlying matter, life and mind in the world. This Spirit is the reality and man; Nature and God are its triple manifestation. In the words of Radhakrishnan:

“It is the basis and background of our being, the universality that cannot be reduced to this or that formula.”⁵

Thus contemporary Indian philosophers have advocated the use of intuitive method in order to arrive at an integral philosophy. Contemporary Indian philosophers have looked to human personality from an integral perspective. They have maintained an integral theory of human nature and advocated a multi-sided scheme of education including education for physical, mental, social, moral and religious development of the male and female. To formulate such a scheme of education, these philosophers borrowed both from ancient Indian wisdom and modern western scientific knowledge. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

“The aim and principles of a true national education are not certainly to ignore modern truth and knowledge but to take our foundations on our own belief, our own mind, and our own spirit.”⁶

³ Nehru, J.L., *Eighteen Months in India*, p. 284.

⁴ Aurobindo, S. *The Renaissance in India*, p. 72.

⁵ Radhakrishnan, S., *An Idealist View of Life*, p. 205.

⁶ Aurobindo, S., *Integral Education*, compiled by Dr. Indra Sen, p.4.



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Except Jawaharlal Nehru and Manabendra Nath Roy whose metaphysics may be called scientific naturalism, all the other “notable Indian philosophers of education followed *Neo-Vedānta* philosophy, a contemporary version of ancient Indian idealism. Therefore, they presented a teleological explanation of the world with harmony between man and Nature. They provided central place to man in the universe and presented axiological explanation of the world enigma. According to them, ideas and ideals are the aims of education. This idealist trend, however, was not opposed to realism, positivism and pragmatism. In contemporary Indian philosophy of education, one finds a meeting of the extremes of idealism and realism. This is due to their eclectic and integral approach to thought and life. This meeting of extremes may be found in the educational philosophy of Gandhi and Radhakrishnan. In the aims and ideals of education they were idealists while their detailed plans of education were based upon realism and pragmatism.

Pragmatism believes that man’s first concern is to make this world worthy of human life. It is pluralistic emphasis upon change as a necessary element of life. It is individualist though emphasizing the social aspect of man. It is humanist and experimentalist. In the field of education, the pragmatist trend has led to emphasis upon economic, cultural and ethical progress of the individuals so that they may develop characters of world-citizens. This is a sound basis for the creation of a better world in future. Programmes and schemes for social service at different stages of education today find an important place in educational institutions. The boys and girls, from time to time, render social service to the community outside the educational institutions so that they may develop a habit of genuine altruism and social service. This social service is based upon the value of equality of all human beings. Contemporary Indian philosophy of education has to be pragmatist since its avowed aim was to present a national system of education suitable for a free country. The pragmatic approach is explicit in the advice of Vivekananda to the students to care more for body building than even spiritual development. Gandhi’s scheme of basic education was everywhere guided by pragmatic spirit.

The aim of the study of these thinkers is to capture the wisdom of the ages and to make it relevant for these times and to help the educators to come up with innovative methodologies to help students to harness their latent potential and channel their energies towards cultivation and sharpening of multiple dimensions of human competencies. The contemporary thinkers of education, especially Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Radhakrishnan tried to propound the standards and values of education from ancient Indian cultural perspective



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and provided an effective approach to make students more socially concerned, compassionate, liberal, inclusive, ethical, and humane through the development of holistic personality.

All over the world educationists are grappled with one central and all-encompassing question; what kind of education is needed for what kind of society of tomorrow? They are conscious of the new role of education and the new demands made on educational systems in a world of accelerating economic, environmental and social change and tension. They have come up with some of the underlying principles which are universal and common to the aims of educators, citizens, policy-makers, and other partners and participants in the process of education at all levels.

According to them education, conservative or liberal must serve society as an instrument for fostering the creation of good citizens. All approaches to redesign the educational processes must take into account the basic and agreed-upon values and concerns of the international community and of the United Nations system such as human rights, tolerance, and understanding, democracy, responsibility, universality, cultural identity, the search for peace, the preservation of the environment and the sharing of knowledge.

There is no denial that the purpose, the aim and drive of the educational institutes, must be to equip the students with the most excellent technological proficiency so that the students may function with clarity and efficiency in the modern world. But a far more important purpose than this is to create the right climate and environment so that the students may develop fully as total human beings. Total human being means not only a human being with inward understanding, with a capacity to explore, to examine his or her inward state and the capacity of going beyond it, but also someone who is good in what he or she does outwardly. In order to achieve this, educational process must awaken the intelligence of the student so that he or she may 'flower in goodness'. The cultivation of a global outlook, a love of nature and a concern for fellow human beings and environment should be part of the scheme of education. When the students leave the school, they are well established in goodness, both outwardly and inwardly. In order to achieve this, education has to cover the four distinct dimensions of the human personality beginning with the physical body, the development of intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities, the development of socially desirable moral values and finally, the inner dimension of spiritual growth.



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Most conservative approaches to education emphasize the need to teach worthy subjects and fundamental moral values to the young. For conservative educators, the main mission of schools is to indoctrinate the young in the moral values of the great tradition. One rarely encounters a conservative educator who believes in providing students with opportunities for change and innovation. Since they disregard issues such as plurality, individual creativity, and critical citizenry, these educators have shown, cannot contribute much to the democratic education. Conservatives favored maintaining a traditional notion of authority in education.

Authority is intimately connected to both tradition and religion. Authority, tradition, and religion are all regarded by conservatives as the foundations for the ways in which we act and think in the present. The three are considered indispensable because they provide stability, meaning, and virtue to our lives. For conservatives, moreover, the surge of problems such as violence and teen-age pregnancy is closely related to our break with the trinity of authority, tradition, and religion.

Conservatives advocate school policies such as more discipline, learning by rote, going back to the basics, teaching right and wrong, and making teachers accountable. They promote changes such as vouchers and charter schools designed to liberate our schools from unions and liberal bureaucrats. These are reforms worth fighting for, but it is tempting to invest too much in them by treating them as ends in themselves.

High standards make anybody excel, and to excel one has to look up to something above oneself as he is now. He has to aspire to something. The gravest fault of our education today is that its content gives us nothing to aspire to. From this elevated outlook we can look down on the impoverishment of today's education, based as it is on self-esteem. Liberals' notion of self-esteem derives from a distinction between self and other abstract terms. The distinction is then overcome by mutual recognition when the self sees itself in the other. Abstractness is as close as liberals get to profundity, but the effect is merely to level people out to their common denominator. The liberal notion of self-esteem is nothing but that juvenile attitude dressed up as philosophy. It says that you can be known as a nice guy if you drop your pretensions, the pretensions that arise from aspirations, from the determination to look up.

Democratic citizens are loyal to democracy and capable of maintaining or advancing it. The content of our education should include both loyalty and capability, because both are necessary and neither element



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guarantees the other. We want a great people that are sustained by great individuals. It is our common aspiration to be a great people. But there is little of greatness in the content of our education now.

The liberals' education is visible in their promotion of multiculturalism and environmentalism. Multiculturalism tries to show that when you look at the apparent diversity of peoples they turn out underneath to be all the same. Multiculturalism can be saved if it is improved in courses of world history that focus on the excellence of each nation and its contribution to progress.

Those in favor of a liberal education commonly argue that a liberal education provides an opportunity for an individual to become "well-rounded." A liberal education focuses on providing general courses on a number of subjects along with several career-related courses. Although the word "well-rounded" may sound like a good explanation of what a liberal education can do for a student, it has become more of a cliché than anything. Little or nothing is typically said about what a well-rounded individual is, why a student needs to become a well-rounded individual, or even specifically why a vocational education would not achieve the same outcome.

John Dewey rejected the notion that the human mind is endowed from birth with reasoning power or that its origin is in the spiritual soul. Mind is not different from the body but one with it. All of man's functions are natural. None are supernatural. Dewey's denial of the validity of all kinds of dualism is the touchstone of his educational philosophy. For him, the removal of these unnatural dualisms would give unity to education and life.

Another important consideration is the relationship of the individual to society. Spencer and others recognized the necessity of studying this relationship by giving to sociology. Dewey, in his, *My Pedagogic Creed*, pointed out the fundamentally social nature of education. He argued that the demands of social situations stimulated the child to act as a member of unity, rather than as an isolated individual.⁷ This social stimulation presses him to act for the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Even the child's natural instincts and tendencies must be directed into socially useful channels. It is to determine the potentialities of an individual unless he is acting with others for the good of the group.⁸ Dewey expanded upon the view that man's nature is socially built. An individual derives his mental powers and other traits from society.⁹ Some of the liberal

⁷ Dewey, J., *My Pedagogic Creed*, p.3.

⁸ Ibid., p.3-6.

⁹ Dewey, J., *Democracy and Education*, p.40-46.



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educational theorists of the twentieth century place upon educational institutions the responsibility not only for making the social nature of the pupils but also for the reconstruction of society itself.¹⁰

A vocational education focuses on providing specialized courses that apply directly to a career such as cosmetology or several automotive careers. An analysis of both vocational and liberal education will clarify the defining characteristics of a well-rounded individual. This analysis will also explain that although a well-rounded individual can be produced through a vocational education, it is much more likely that this will be achieved through pursuing a liberal education.

The word “well-rounded” describes someone who possesses completeness in some respect. There are a number of examples in which completeness may be found. A person who has knowledge in a vast number of subjects may be seen as possessing completeness. Another example of completeness may be found in an individual that possesses many qualities that help them to function in a diverse environment. In either case, a well-rounded individual seems to be a person who pursues an education in many aspects of life and can function in a variety of situations. It could be said that a well-rounded individual attains a broad or comprehensive knowledge from not only the pages of books, but also from life itself. According to Cronon William:

“Liberally educated people not only use their education to pursue their own talents, but also to explore. While a vocational education enables an individual to attain knowledge in their specific field of study and become very successful in that area, the specificity also hinders opportunities to explore.”¹¹

Through Liberal Education has assumed many forms across different times and places, it has always been concerned with important educational aims: cultivating intellectual and ethical judgment, helping students comprehend and negotiate their relationship to the larger world, and preparing graduates for lives of civic responsibility and leadership. On the merits, then, we might expect that liberal education would be the uncontested preference of virtually everyone who goes to college.

What counts as ‘the good life’ on such a view seems to be something like the life which most satisfies one’s preferences, whatever these preferences may be. Rawls, in his *A Theory of Justice*, holds a similar view. But he has only given certain conditions. Among the most important of these are: that the ‘preferences’ here are

¹⁰ Theodore Brameld., *Toward a Reconstructed Philosophy of Education*, p.vi

¹¹ Cronon, William., ‘Only Connect’: *The Goals of a Liberal Education*.” *The Key Reporter*. 64. 2 (Winter 98-99): 1-6.



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the hierarchically-ordered ends in an individual's life-plan, chosen after a process of deliberation in the light of a full knowledge of different options and consequences of adopting them; and secondly that 'something is good only if it fits into ways of life consistent with the principles of right already on hand.'¹² 'The good life' cannot include the life of a Nero, however much their post deliberative desires and satisfied fulfillment of basic moral obligations is taken as read.

Gandhi said that there is what is known as true education in his workers. True education is not of temporary duration, but it is wholesome and complete in nature. In Gandhi's view the end of all education should surely be service even while the pupil is studying. The pupil should consider his educational career as a rare opportunity which is to be utilized for developing balanced and integrated personality full of noble values.

¹² Rawls., *A Theory of Justice*, p.396.