



PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION – THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The word philosophy is derived from two Greek terms ‘philos’ (love) and ‘sophia’ (wisdom), which means love of knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom consists not only in the knowledge of things but also in the evaluation of nature of things and appreciation of their value or worth. A philosopher wants to know the whole scheme of things and events in the universe with a view to understand the proper place of each thing in relation to the whole. Thus, the entire universe is included within the scope of philosophy.

The function of philosophy is to ‘order and guide’ human life and action. It must advance and ennoble human life and broaden our outlook. Thus, philosophy is not merely confined to the pursuit of wisdom but also a way of life. Since any philosophy arises and develops in the context of human life, it must take into account the contemporary social situation as well as the needs and aspirations of people.

Education is an essential ingredient of human life, for an uneducated person is considered a beast. It is education that makes a distinction between a man and a beast. Hence, the philosophers and thinkers of all ages and in all countries emphasized the value of education which enhances human qualities and suppresses brute qualities in man.

Education has tremendous power to mould the attitudes, ideas, beliefs, values and ideals of human beings. In other words, the success of humanity and its civilization, in all the ages, has been shaped and moulded by the educational philosophy of that period. Thus, education is a determining force in the creation of good persons and establishment of a better social order.

The philosophy of education is a branch of practical philosophy and it deals with the nature, content, forms, means and aims of education for the intellectual and moral development of individuals. The ancient Indian and Greek philosophers developed systematic theories of education to carry out the educational requirements of people of their times, and to promote individual wellbeing and social harmony.

The ancient Indian thinkers visualized human life as a whole consisting of physical, psychic and spiritual aspects. The progress of human society, as they thought, is not to be found in its material advancement, but to be found in what kind of people the society produces. The quality of life requires a balance between body, mind and spiritual aspects of a person, and therefore, imparting of education is to be directed towards making the child into a whole person capable of leading a meaningful and purposive life.



According to ancient Indian thinkers, man is basically a spiritual being with a capacity to realize the spirituality. Man becomes completely human only when his sensibility to spirit is awakened.¹ To become human, one must realize his true and spiritual nature inherent in him. Thus, the ultimate goal of education, to Indian thinkers, is self-realization or knowing oneself, which means realization of the best qualities inherent in a person. Spiritual education does not mean teaching the irrational and dogmatic religious ideas, but acquiring the knowledge of inner self, awaken the student to this fact, enable him to find the spirit within and mould his or her life and action in the light and power of the inner self.

Varna System or Social Gradation:

The ancient Indian society has been divided into two systems of social organization — the *varna* (social gradation) and *asrama* (stages of life). *Varna* and *asrama* systems are basically social requirements for the good of the individual and society.

The people are classified into four *varnas* or orders of the society² on the basis of their nature, ability, aptitudes, temperaments and capacities. The four orders are – *brahmanas* (men of intelligence), *kshatriyas* (men of ruling or warrior class), *vaisyas* (men of business and agriculture) and *sudras* (men of service who serve the other three orders). The division of society into four orders is a form of social division of labour, and the four orders looked after different functions of the society.

Qualities and Duties of a Teacher:

One of the primary duties of *brahmanas* (men of intellectual class) is teaching to pupils. That man is called a *brahmana* (man of intelligence) who is engaged in studying and teaching, who strives for acquisition of knowledge, who is pure in behaviour and conversant with righteousness, who is always devoted to truth, who shows aversion for all unrighteous acts, and who controls his passions and propensities.

Since the role of a teacher is very crucial in imparting education to students, the Indian philosophers accorded a special place or an elevated position in the society to the teachers. Of all the sections of the society, the teaching community enjoyed certain special privileges, because it is the teacher who shapes and moulds the future of the student. While the father and the mother are responsible for the birth and physical existence of the child, it is teacher who infuses life into the material body of the child by means of his knowledge and wisdom. For this reason, the Indian thinkers considered the father, the mother, and the teacher are equal to god.

For Indian thinkers, education is a process of unfolding or manifestation of the inherent qualities of a person that are present in him or her in a dormant state, or what Aristotle says actualization of one's innate abilities, talents and capacities to the fullest extent. In other words, education is a course of action that arouses or awakens the innate abilities, talents, skills and potentialities of a person, rather than imposing them from outside.

Swamy Vivekananda says: "Education is a process of manifestation and perfection of those qualities that are inherent in the child." The duty of the teacher is



to help and encourage the student for the manifestation of all the best qualities inherent in him. True education, for Gandhi, means drawing out of the best qualities inherent in the child.³ It is the duty of the teacher to remove the obstacles and help the child to grow into a true human being. Thus, true education does not consist in forcing knowledge into the soul, but in bringing it out.

Asrama System or Stages of Life:

The ancient Indian thinkers, unlike their western counterparts, were not content with theorizing human life. They divided the whole life of an individual into four stages, and each stage of life is a training period in order to qualify himself for the next stage. At every stage the individual is supposed to discharge certain duties, and gradually evolve himself as a perfect being. Each stage is a progressive step in the life of the individual which finally leads him to self-realization.

The institution of *asrama* or stages of life is a unique contribution of India to human ideals. The four stages of life are – *brahmacharya* (the stage of studentship), *gruhasta* (the stage of a house holder), *vanaprasta* (the stage of withdrawal from worldly life and going to forest), and *sannyasa* (the stage of renunciation). Each stage signifies a place of halt in the journey of life to reach finally to the spiritual destination, that is, self-realization. At every stage the individual is supposed to discharge certain duties, and gradually evolve himself as a perfect being.

The Stage of Studentship:

Brahmacharya or the first stage of life is related to the life of studentship. It is the preparatory stage of the individual, and he is supposed to acquire the requisite abilities and potentialities to meet the challenges of life ahead, and the virtues that make him an ideal person.

During the formative period of eight to ten years, the student is attached to a teacher. He should live with the teacher till he completes his studies, and serve the teacher like a menial servant.⁴ His objectives are threefold – to acquire knowledge (both secular and sacred), to develop character, and to learn social responsibility.⁵ He stays with his teacher and pursues learning as an end in itself, but not as a means to material gain. He submits to an austere discipline aimed at helping him conserve his energy and build a strong mind and body.

The student should cleanse his soul by purity of conduct and by restraints and vows. He should cast off procrastination and idleness. He should lead a life of celibacy and dutifully serve his preceptor. He should be ready to receive Vedic instructions, sitting at the feet of his preceptor, with eager desire to learn. He should cultivate simplicity, avoid evil speech, and take lessons only when his preceptor invites him for it.⁶ Having thus passed the first stage of his life in the study of Vedas and observance of vows and fasts, and having given the preceptor the final fee, the student should take his leave and return home for entering into a life of house holder.

After completion of studies, the student takes a bath symbolic of his studies being completed. The Taittiriya Upanishad describes a clear picture of the ancient Indian system of education:⁷ The teacher instructs the student:



“Speak the truth and practice virtue;
Neglect not the study of Vedas;
Not to be negligent of welfare and prosperity;
Not to be negligent of duties to the gods and the fathers;
Do not cut off the thread of the offspring;
Be one to whom the mother is a god;
Be one to whom father is a god;
Be one to whom the teacher is a god;
Be one to whom the guest is a god;
This is the command. This is the teaching.
This is the secret doctrine of the Veda.”

The ancient Indian and Greek philosophers recognized the importance of moral instruction to the young students to mould them into excellent and virtuous citizens. They thought that moral integrity is an indispensable prerequisite for the development of individual personality and for the establishment of a better social order. It is said that life without values is not a human life. The goodness or badness of a particular society depends on the conduct of men and women of that society. Hence, the ancient Indian thinkers regarded moral education as an essential requirement to every child and youth to lead a righteous and meaningful life ahead to them.

Contemporary Trends in Indian Education:

The concept of education in India has varied from time to time along with a change in social situation and a change in the needs and aspirations of people. Education, as one of the practical aspects of human social life, must cater to the needs and aspirations of people in their day-to-day life. Since education is one of the efficient means for material development, political evolution, and socio-economic progress, many new trends entered into the field of education to meet the challenges of the contemporary social situation.

True education must free one's mind from all the prejudices against the other men and make him realize the truth that every human being living in this world is akin to him. It should make every person to acquire the passion and perspective to fight against sexual and racial prejudices, class privileges, and group antagonisms. Since all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, one must have regard for freedom, dignity and rights of others.

The modern men and women of India recognized the value of scientific and technological education to satisfy their material needs and comforts. Consequently, more emphasis is laid on scientific knowledge at the expense of ethics and aesthetics, literature and art, philosophical and spiritual knowledge which will contribute to the development of humanness in men. This trend in educational system has brought fast moral and spiritual degradation of people resulting in many social evils such as terrorism, violence, hatred, distrust etc.

A proper synthesis of scientific and spiritual power could help the way for a better world to live in. To build a balanced personality, education should neither purely



be materialistic nor purely be spiritualistic, but a combination of both, which is helpful in building a stable civilization. Too much stress on any one aspect makes education partial and unbalanced, and it may lead to cultural crisis.

Modern man should not regard himself as an Indian or American or European, but a human being that belongs to the whole of humanity. The purpose and goal of education must be directed towards establishing positive world peace. This goal can be achieved by inculcating an understanding and appreciation of other cultures in the young minds, and by establishing just and humane relationships among the people of the world.

Concluding Remarks:

Education enables individuals to develop into free and responsible citizens capable of self-determination. Education is a means to an end and that end should be creation of good persons and establishment of a better social order. It enlightens our insight and broadens our reasoning. Education is capable of establishing peace, progress, and universal brotherhood on earth.

Although Indian culture is basically spiritualistic in its outlook, the scientific and technological discoveries and their applications in modern times brought a tremendous change in the ideas, attitudes, beliefs and values of contemporary Indians. Many contemporary thinkers believe that scientific and technological education is an essential requirement of the times to fight against the great evils of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment or to uplift the living standards of people. But at the same time spiritual education is also necessary to enhance the freedom, dignity and rights of individuals.

The present generation in India and elsewhere is suffering from hatred, jealousy, anger, intolerance, distrust, dis-honesty, conflicts, violence, lust for power etc. These evil forces are rampant everywhere and disturbing almost every aspect of human life. In order to set right the evil factors of our current social order and also towards creating a new world order, we have to emphasize the need for value-oriented education.

The evil forces of contemporary social order are to be removed by appropriate educational instruction that can bring change in the heart and minds of young boys and girls. The youth have tremendous energy and vitality and it needs to be channelled in the right direction to get the best out of themselves.

To develop a strong character, we have to create a base for strong value system. To mould the character and personality of the child and the youth, value-oriented education must be introduced and taught at the school and college level to every child and youth. The course must be designed in a way that they reflect the ancient wisdom of India in a contemporary fashion.

Value-oriented education does not mean preaching certain religious and dogmatic ideas to students, but imparting the knowledge of universal values like truth, nonviolence, tolerance, love, compassion, honesty, altruism, righteousness, universal brotherhood, global peace etc. The contemporary Indian thinkers like Swamy Vivekananda, Gandhi and many others emphasized the importance of value-oriented



education as a remedy to many social evils that are disturbing the present humanity. Gandhi believes that strong character is the basis of a good citizen. Hence, he pleaded for instruction of value-oriented education to all young boys and girls along with other subjects. Swamy Vivekananda says: “We need that type of 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.”⁸

Educational philosophy plays a vital role in the creation of good persons and a new world social order. It is an efficient and effective instrument for social change and development of a new world culture. The oneness of mankind should be the guiding principle of our educational system. Man’s greatness is not in what he or she is, but in what he or she can be. The people of present generation, with free and untrammled use of reason, are capable of finding solutions to their problems. Thus, the ultimate goal and purpose of our educational philosophy should be creation of good persons and establishment of an ideal world social order wherein the entire humanity can live in peace, prosperity and harmony.

Notes and References

1. Robert A. McDermott (ed) “*Basic writings of S. Radhakrishnan*” (Bombay, Jaico Publishing House, 1970), p.192.
2. The first reference to the fourfold division of *varna* system is found in a Rig-Vedic hymn known as *purusa-sukta*. (Rig Veda X. XC.12)

The laws of Manu also refers to the fourfold division of *varna* to the divine origin. (*Manu Samhita*, 1.87).

3. R.K. Prabu and U.R. Rao, (ed) “*The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*” (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 2002), p.379.
4. In the Santi Parva of Mahabharata, in a discourse between the sage Bhrigu and the sage Bharadwaja, the sage Bhrigu said: “In the days of Yore, the divine Brahman, for benefiting the world and for the protection of righteousness, indicated four modes of life.” (Mahabharata, English tr. By Kisari Mohan Ganguli, (New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981), Santi Parva, Sec. CXCI, Vol.IX, p.37).
5. In the Chhandogya Upanishad it is said that the pupil had to work for his teacher in house and field, attend to his sacred fires, look after the cattle and collect alms for him. (Chhandogya Upanishad, IV, 3, 5, and 10).

The Dharma Sutras of Gautama, Apastamba, Vasishtha and Baudhayana contain regulations relating to social life and rules dealing with the duties of teachers and students. (Gautama, II, 14, 15, 20, 22 and 24; Apastamba, I.2).



In later works like the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesa* there were stories and fables which are meant for inculcation of moral truths.

6. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, III. 1, 2, 3 and 4.
7. Taittiriya Upanishad provides a clear description of the ethical teachings of the ancient Indian education. (Taittiriya Upanishad, I.11. 1-3).
8. Swamy Vivekananda, "*Complete Works*", Vol.V, (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1987), p.342.

