

## Synthesizing Modernity & Tradition: the Relevance of Vivekananda

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Even after fifty years of Independence the Indian Republic can not boast of a philosophy of education. Whether it be primary, secondary or higher education, there is almost a total break down of structure in most parts of the country, and not because of a chronic shortage of money only. The charge that the government is investing only a miniscule portion of the GDP in education is valid, but this is not divorced from a lack of interest and clarity in our policy makers. There is need for a serious debate on what education is, what it should accomplish, and how it should accomplish it; what precisely should be the desired objectives and how far would they be feasible and desirable in a given historical situation.

### I

#### *The Contemporary Scene*

The contemporary scene in the pedagogic world fills one with deep anguish. Campuses which should have been tranquil centres dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge are tempest tossed. Students no longer have the respect they used to have for teachers; empty class rooms round the year are pointers to the recourse to unfair means which commonly follows at the end; library buildings fall to ruin through years of disuse; priceless books gather dust while 'guides and guess-papers' flood the market. As if the scene were not dismal enough, the spectre of violence haunts most campuses even at the secondary level. The university colleges are periodically converted into police barracks. Services of paramilitary forces have to be requisitioned at times to

evict illegal residents from student hostels even in the better known universities, and for conducting student union elections. One occasionally hears news of hardened criminals having stayed in hostels, or student bodies becoming the breeding ground for terrorist organizations in insurgency affected states. What is alarming is the fact that lumpen behaviour no longer provokes the horror which in days past accompanied much milder action. Somewhere there is a tacit acceptance of vulgarity, even as teachers lose their once venerated position in society. Why have things come to such a pass? Where have we gone wrong?

It is undeniable that the quality of teachers has suffered grievously over the years. Perhaps this was itself due to our callousness regarding education and a misplaced sense of priority. It is natural that any confusion on the teacher's desk will be transmitted to the benches in due course. The teaching of history, one of the germinal subjects, has become increasingly skewed. The historical sense has been undermined and an atavistic mind set is taking over the intelligentsia. The progressive elements are under siege. It seems that in today's society 'progress' is perceived as only a movement towards a free market system. The students are failing to see that 'free economy' is perhaps not so 'free' after all, that it is hopelessly biased against the interests of the poorer sections of society. The better students in the better colleges are getting increasingly alienated from people. The young are choosing to adopt social identities that in themselves risk building a life style that compounds the disadvantage. This social exclusion is often due to the policies and practices which institutions have adopted. There is penury of thought in the universities and the departments of Economics, Philosophy and Political Science no longer make original contributions in the realm of thought.

Merely changing the structure of the Institutions will not bring about a recovery. For all the talk of mono-faculty institutions, they are neither viable nor desirable. What needs to be changed is the ethos which has engendered such a slide back in a few decades. Education should lead to integration, but the fragmentation evident in young personalities today is indicative of a grave failing in the entire system of imparting knowledge. Schooling should lead to harmony in oneself. Man can bear social alienation if he is in harmony with his own soul. Most of the students today are self alienated. That is the real malady afflicting Indian education today. This root cause has to be addressed.

For this purpose it is necessary that we study the evolution of India's modern educational system, vis-à-vis the British, which is the source of the former. This will provide a historical background to the analysis, and facilitate a better comprehension of the process leading to the present day state of affairs.

## II

### *Beginnings of Modern Education in India*

The modern educational system was introduced into India amidst the replacement of one set of rulers by another, and an acrimonious debate as to the medium and content of education. This was largely due to a difference over the worth of traditional Indian scholarship. Some believed that it was the repository of the highest level of knowledge that could be attained and that knowledge would be available if only the past could be revived. This view was later to be championed by the Arya Samaj. The other group led by Macaulay, held on to the other extreme that all of Indian culture was a colossal mass of unadulterated superstition, that its medical doctrines would disgrace an English farrier, and English school girls would go into paroxysms of laughter over its astronomy. Needless to add, both views were equally unhistorical and biased. In this context it is relevant to quote A.R. Desai:

No society can ever exist without economic activity. It must carry on the production process even with a view to maintaining the bare physical existence of its members. To be able to produce, that is to transform elements of nature into forms suitable for meeting the needs of men, it must gather an understanding of nature i.e. it must achieve scientific knowledge. It is in the process of social practice of man for biological existence that mechanics, physics, chemistry, agronomy and other sciences developed. . . . Every society, however backward, therefore possessed some scientific knowledge and technology. It always possessed a philosophy or a world outlook, however crude it might be. . . . The national chauvinist claim of the Arya Samaj arose out of its ignorance that all knowledge is historically conditioned, that, though growing, it is finite at a given moment and that its depth and extent depend upon the level of social development which a people has reached. Pre-British Indian society, during all phases of its existence, stood at a low level of socio-economic development and, therefore, the knowledge possessed by it was less than that achieved by modern humanity. . . . Macaulay's uncritical denial was as unhistorical as the uncritical idealizing of India's past culture by the Arya Samaj.<sup>1</sup>

It is history that the Charter Act of 1833 formed a watershed in the evolution of modern education in India wherein the East India Company for the first time assumed state responsibility for education and provided one lakh rupees annually for the purpose. It is equally well recorded how the 'Anglicists' led by Macaulay and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, contended with the 'Orientalists' led by Munroe and Elphinstone, over the complexion of the education policy. The then Governor-General of India, Lord Bentinck, adopting the view of the former, resolved in 1835 'the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone. . . ' and 'that all the funds be henceforth employed in imparting to the native population a knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of English language.'<sup>2</sup> The government neglected mass education, in the belief that the educated classes would in time to come, expedite mass education through independent efforts. It is worth mentioning that consequent to a petition submitted by Jagannath Shankar Seth, a member on the Board of Education, that people would better understand their courses in vernacular rather than in a foreign language, in Bombay, notwithstanding the use of English as the sole medium of instruction at the collegiate level, the use of vernaculars was retained at the secondary stage. These contours of educational policy were further defined with the Woods Despatch (1854), and were followed through the subsequent years.

Before evaluating the course of events in those subsequent years, it is advisable to peer into the minds of those policy makers, at the motives that had guided them. Although undoubtedly it was a progressive influence, the introduction of modern education was largely an instrument for the furtherance of the administrative and economic interests of the English. The spread of education was concomitant to the spread of English territory in India. As the state machinery grew, in response to growing territory and trade, the English desperately needed educated men to man the middle and lower echelons of the government machinery. This system provided clerks, lawyers, doctors and technicians necessary for running the vast empire. Lastly, it was the colonizers' dream, epitomized in the ambition of Cecil Rhodes, that the British colonies in India and South Africa and ultimately most of the world would be converted into 'mini-Englands', enshrining supposedly the highest ideals known to man. They

harboured fantastic notions that even the United States of America would one day be regained as English territory, and most of the world would be administered by the benign principles of England – embodied in its educational system – which produced the flower of its youth.<sup>3</sup>

### *English and Scottish Systems*

A brief overview of this English system of Education—its development and fruition, as well as the conditions under which it took root and flowered—would provide insight into its philosophy of education. Further, it would help in a better comprehension of complexities in the development of educational institutions in India.

Eighteenth century English schooling which laid down the basis on which most of the colonizers were later to be educated came slowly into shape, moulded by factors peculiar to England. The prosperity of the country gentleman, had not been supplanted as yet by the affluence of post Industrial Revolution merchants, and they were still largely unaffected by status symbols. Most of the upper class schools had barely come into their own, and much of the aristocracy did not patronize Eton or Harrow. Classical curriculum, in most of the better known institutions, was by no means the only thing taught, and there was considerable variety in the dissemination of knowledge. However, much talent came out of those schools and went on to influence the course of history in many parts of Asia and Africa.

The picture in Scotland was singularly different. Although school education was hopelessly inadequate and starved of funds, aided by Scottish national character and the fact that it kept in touch with ground realities, the future generation of University scholars were being bred in an atmosphere of hardship. Making sacrifices for the cause of education, unlike their affluent counterparts in England, boys went to the Universities subsisting on the minimal provisions brought from meager households, and more zeal for learning than perhaps was to be found anywhere in Europe. Perhaps this was because there had been no transplant from above, but the system was home grown and incredibly egalitarian. Even Scots baiters like Swift, praised their level of learning. In the words of G.M. Trevelyan:

The intellectual unity of the nation and the good understanding of its component classes were all the greater because Scottish lairds in those days sent their own bairns to the village school. The idea of sending a Scottish gentleman's son to an English public school was rendered unthinkable alike

by thrift and by patriotism. Education in the village school strengthened the young laird's love of his native land and landscape, and inclined him when he came to man's estate to sympathy with his tenants who had once been his school fellows. The broad Scots tongue, of which the highest were not ashamed, the traditions and ballads of the countryside, were the common heritage of all ... Scotland was at once more feudal and more egalitarian than England. An amazing freedom of speech, between classes that were yet perfectly distinct in a strict social hierarchy, characterized the relation of men who had sat on the same bench at school, and whose fathers had ridden shoulder to shoulder to fray and foray.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the poverty, and parochialism bred of doctrinaire religion, the seeds of greatness blossomed in Scotland when she gained access to English markets after the unification with England. And no small role was played by the Scottish model of education, a synthesis of the progressive and the traditional. It might have been in many ways superior to the contemporary English model, so much so, that when Adam Smith returned to Glasgow University after his sojourn at Oxbridge, his remark was, "In the University of Oxford the greater part of the Professors have, for these many years, given up altogether even the pretence of teaching."<sup>5</sup>

In England, the stalemate between Churchmen and Dissenters caused primary education to be largely neglected. No government could muster up the courage to commit substantial sums of money to the creation of a general schooling system which would have pitted two factions against each other over the control of a system maintained by state funds. However, taking its first hesitant steps in that direction in 1833, the state granted the not so princely sum of twenty thousand pounds a year for the school buildings of the various voluntary societies. (In India, in the absence of such hindrances, the East India Company moved much more decisively. This resulted in a set up divorced from larger ground realities). In 1841, Sir James Graham was constrained to write to Henry Brougham, 'Religion, the keystone of education, is in this country the bar to its progress.'<sup>6</sup> But at the same time, the most powerful impetus to the spread came from the rapidly expanding British Empire and its growing trade. The same forces which fashioned India's schooling were to exert a tremendous influence over the educational policy in Britain. The demand for people of calibre to man the ever increasing number of leadership positions in the ever widening administrative and commercial base at home and abroad led to the growth of a private elitist secondary school system, where

much of the new aristocracy received their schooling. The new fashion was the 'Public School,' where the upper classes were united together and segregated from the rest of the country, all for lack of a uniform grammar school chain funded by the government. 'The tendency to social segregation, enhanced by the geographic division of the various class 'quarters' in the layout of great modern cities, was thus further accentuated by education.'<sup>7</sup> Girls continued to be at a disadvantage. But the Industrial Revolution ensured that adult education was not neglected. The first mechanics institute founded by Dr. Birbeck in Scotland, spread throughout England after 1823. Even when successive governments were paralyzed due to religious obstructionism, adult education culminated in the establishment of London University in 1827, in sharp contrast to the still theological institutions of Oxford and Cambridge. The parsimony of the government, as well as its inability to take forthright measures let many a discrepancy creep into the field of education. Prussia for instance, gave its people education, and only later, a degree of political freedom. The English state gave a great deal of political freedom, but no worthwhile education to its masses, which seriously hindered the development of radical thought. Only after enfranchising the urban working class by the Reform Act of 1867, did the politicians feel the need to educate their 'masters'. Perhaps this was the reason why England has remained conservative at heart, in the realm of socio-political thought, and even intolerance is occasionally expressed against non-conformists as in the case of Bertand Russel during the war.<sup>8</sup> With her huge industrial base, and favourable geo-political conditions and a moderate population England has on the whole succeeded in her educational enterprise. But in her erstwhile colony, with no corresponding mercantile empire, with world markets already carved up among the big powers, and a huge population with deep ethnic divisions, the blind replication of the colonizer's model could prove to be disastrous. It might be pertinent to remember Trevelyan's warning regarding English Public Schools: 'Much of the success and much of the failure of modern England can be attributed to the public schools. They were one of the great institutions unconsciously developed by English instinct and character, and even less than parliaments could they be successfully imitated overseas.'<sup>9</sup>

In 1870, Gladstone attempted a synthesis of the old and new and through his Bill doubled state grants to the existing Church Schools and to the Roman Catholic Schools in a show of tolerance. Moreover,

new Board Schools were established across the country and any denominational religious teaching was prohibited in them. Thus a system of universal primary education was established throughout the country. Secondary Schooling was remedied by Balfour's Education Act of 1902. These enabled England to keep up with Europe in matters of basic learning.

Such was the evolution of the English schooling system on which much of our educational set-up is patterned. We have to keep in mind, the differences in our geopolitical conditions; the chronological difference which assumes great importance in this fast changing world; the difference in our ethnic structure; and our peculiar needs arising out of the above when we endeavour to formulate the philosophy underlying our primary, secondary, and last but not the least, higher education. Any planning has to keep in mind the peculiarities of the concerned society and its socio-historical background, when suggesting remedies.

Trevelyan's analysis of the English education system, at once lyrical and penetrating and instructive, bears quoting at length:

Our modern system of popular education was *indeed indispensable and has conferred great benefits on the country, but it has been a disappointment in some important respects. Being a town-made system it has failed to meet rural needs, of which the Board of Education failed to recognize the distinctive character. It has speeded up rather than diminished the rural exodus. More generally speaking, it has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading, and easy prey to sensations and cheap appeals.* Consequently both literature and journalism have been to a large extent debased since 1870, because they now cater for millions of half-educated and quarter-educated people whose forbears, not being able to read at all, were not the patrons of newspapers or of books. The small highly educated class no longer sets the standards to the extent it used to, and tends to adopt the standards of the majority. Whether in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries the lower forms of literature and journalism will completely devour the higher has yet to be seen. If they do not, *it will be due to improved secondary and higher education forming a sufficiently large class to perpetuate a demand for things really worth reading.*<sup>10</sup> (emphasis added).

### III

#### *Education in Europe*

The development and growth of English education, in itself offering valuable pointers towards the analysis of the formation of subsequent

systems in the colonies, would become a still more interesting study if juxtaposed to the pan-European picture in the decisive years between 1848-1875. 'Originality of vision' became a quick casualty as technology came to occupy the centre in the scheme of learning. Primary education became more important and even military superiority in terms of soldier-capability came to be attributed to this factor. There was more profit in developing basic abilities as the fruits of higher scientific approach could be 'borrowed'. Needless to say, humane thought did not figure prominently in the list of preferences in the mind of educational policy makers. It will be relevant to quote Hobsbawm in this context:

The practical value of a good primary education for science-based technologies, both economic and military is obvious. Not the least reason for the ease with which the Prussians beat the French in 1870-71 was the vastly greater literacy of their soldiers. On the other hand, what economic development needed at a higher level was not so much scientific originality and sophistication—these could be borrowed—as the capacity to grasp and manipulate science: 'development' rather than research. The American universities and technical academies, which were undistinguished by the standards of, say, Cambridge and the Polytechnique, were economically superior to the British ones because they actually provided a systematic education for Engineers such as did not exist in the old country. They were superior to the French, because they mass produced engineers of adequate level instead of producing a few superbly intelligent and well-educated ones.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the foundations of some of the economic superpowers of the future (now mostly characterized by insularity of vision regarding global upliftment and no great commitment to struggling humanity) were laid on the basis of a blandly utilitarian policy with modest emphasis on encouragement to budding thinkers. This had roots perhaps in an abhorrence of any non-conformism with the dominant mercantilist thinking, a non-conformism that was largely derided and later was to be the hall mark of people like Tolstoy in Russia and Thoreau in America itself. As this policy was rendered successful in an ambience of booming industrial production, in a stage of history when technological innovations were changing the face of civilization in Europe and America, among the members of upper class society, the new successful men, there could be detected a contempt for learning which no longer guaranteed social respect and were thought detrimental to the holding of so called healthy and sound views. This emphasis was overwhelmingly on material gains. Thus any education

had to be geared in this direction. Samuel Smiles succinctly stated: "The experience to be gathered from books, though often valuable, is but of the nature of learning; whereas the experience gained from actual life is of the nature of wisdom; and a small store of the latter is worth vastly more than a stock of the former."<sup>12</sup> Admirable sentiments, except, that 'life' and 'experience' are cited in an explicitly material context, with no reflection at all on the maturing influences of thought and emotion. Perhaps collective modern Indian psyche harbours views quite close to that of Smiles.

### *Nation building*

One more trend that is of signal importance to India, was to be evident in Europe shortly. The issue of education, as in India, became an integral part of the issue of nation building especially in those parts of Europe where multi-lingual, multi-cultural nations were acquiring shape. Although by no means a novelty in the plane of thought, the concept of 'nation' was yet to take a tangible form. Education was one of those institutions which could induce uniformity into community life. It was a supremely important organ which could propagate the idea of a national language and national culture. But there was one vital difference between Europe and India. In the nascent nations of Europe, such endeavours were state sponsored, whereas in India, nothing was farther from the minds of the policy planners. As mentioned earlier, all they aimed at was to fulfill their economic ends, which could be best served by keeping India divided. The reaction to the educational policy in India—the insistence on vernacular instruction vis-à-vis the stress on English teaching by different sections of Indians in the nineteenth century, as well as the ongoing debate over English in the present, can find a broad explanation in these lines about Europe in the 1870's:

Hence also the crucial importance for struggling national movements of the fight to win 'cultural autonomy', i.e. to control the relevant part of state institutions, e.g. to achieve school instruction in and administrative use for their language. The issue was not one which affected the illiterate, who learned their dialect from their mothers anyway, nor the minority peoples who assimilated en bloc to the prevailing language of the ruling class. . . . On the other hand, the issue was vital for the middle class and educated elites emerging from backward or subaltern peoples. It was they who separately resented the privileged access to important and prestigious posts which

native speakers of the 'official' language had. . . . And yet, as nation-states were formed, as the public posts and professions of progressive civilization multiplied, as school education became more general, above all as migration urbanized rural peoples, these resentments found an increasingly general resonance. For school and institutions, in imposing one language of instruction, also imposed a culture, a nationality.<sup>13</sup>

*Discordant notes*

The resonance from an educational policy that from the outset had been set in a clash of discordant notes could hardly be one of harmony. We have seen how British education developed organically out of a set of conditions which acted as midwife and nursed it to strength. But in India, the results were different. Generations reared on a system of education rife with conflict, could neither anticipate nor stem the fissiparous trends that soon followed independence. They could not appreciate the dammed up force of unfulfilled aspirations that burst with freedom, and as yet unrequited, threatened to tear the social fabric apart. These unresolved tendencies cause a relapse from the modern to the archaic in many countries that had been colonies of European powers, and whose ruling class had been educated on Western models.

Even in countries which are not characterized by group violence, the tendency to tilt towards the rightist religious movements is pronounced. These movements are led and manned mostly by people educated in the erstwhile secular system of schooling.

Among the urban leaders are those whom the Indian Press during the 1991 elections referred to as 'Scuppies'—saffron clad yuppies; they are successful businessmen and administrators who see in Hindu political parties a stabilizing influence on the country, and not a narrow dogmatism. In other movements of religious nationalism also one can find this scuppie pattern of an educated urban religious elite linked with a large, disenfranchised rural constituency. In Sri Lanka, for instance, groups of uneducated rural youth have urban student allies. In Sudan, where the Islamic regime is based on the support of the uneducated masses, the leadership is well educated; the Muslim leader, Hassan Abdullah Turrabi, studied in Paris at the Sorbonne. Many Palestinian Muslim leaders were also educated and trained abroad. The same is true of the Islamic Front in Algeria, where participants in the 1991-92 uprising included many highly educated doctors, scientists, and university professors.<sup>14</sup>

Juergensmeyer, the author of these lines, further explains:

It is no mystery why religious nationalism has become so popular at this moment in history. In times of social turbulence and political confusion which the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of American economic power and cultural influence have created around the world—new panaceas abound. It was inevitable that many of these would involve religion, sometimes perceived as the only stable point in a swirl of economic and political indirection.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the reason for the swing to the obscurantist, intolerant right was the result of a collective sense of insecurity in the educated. Since the earlier efficacy of the educational system lay in its ability to translate their material dreams into reality, its foundations were shaken soon after it became apparent that most of these dreams could not be sustained by the national developmental models. Most of the elite-professionals tried to realize them by going West or settling for lucrative outlets at home without the least concern for larger meanings. We have not a few instances of blind careerism—of scientists trained in subsidized national institutions going abroad for better lifestyle, or, I.I.T. graduates doing a management course and then finally joining the I.A.S.

This melee, can be traced to the restricted role models education has offered, due to which the development of personality has been stunted. This had roots in the unidirectional reaction of most thinkers, at the time of formulating alternative paradigms of education. Some like the Arya Samajists looked backward; other like the Anglisists looked only westward. There is a need to think of a new philosophy of education which, while incorporating the temper of the times and looking forward, would, *at the same time, also look inward.*

The question naturally arises whether there is any source which can provide the basis of such philosophy, or are we merely speaking in terms wholly utopian.

#### IV

##### *Equal Exchange between East & West*

Swami Vivekananda was aware of the great opportunities that socio-educational reforms had presented to the country. He realized that India could be shaken out of centuries of torpor and brought within

the mainstream of consciousness flowing from the new world. Severely critical of past insulation, he however refused to believe that everything traditionally Indian was destined for the scrap yard; far from it, the influences from the West would only ensure the free flow of thought cleansed of rabid xenophobia. He was to say:

One of the great causes of India's misery and downfall has been that she narrowed herself, went into her shell, as the oyster does, and refused to give her jewels and treasures to the other races of mankind, refused to give the life giving truths to thirsting nations outside the Aryan fold. That has been the one great cause, that we did not go out, that we did not compare notes with other nations, —that has been the one great cause of our downfall, and everyone of you know that that little stir, the little life you see in India, begins from the day when Raja Ram Mohun Roy broke through the walls of that exclusiveness. Since that day, history in India has taken another turn, and now it is growing with accelerated motion. If we have had little rivulets in the past, deluges are coming, and none can resist them. Therefore we must go out, and the secret of life is to give and take. Are we to take always, to sit at the feet of the westerners to learn everything, even religion? We can learn mechanism from them. We can learn many other things. . . . Therefore we must go out, exchange our spirituality for anything they have to give us; for the marvels of the region of spirit we will exchange the marvels of the region of matter. We will not be students always, but teachers also. There can not be friendship without equality, and there can not be equality when one party is always the teacher and the other party sits always at his feet. If you want to become equal with the English man or the American you will have to teach as well as to learn, and you have plenty yet to teach the world for centuries to come.<sup>16</sup>

The emphasis on equal exchange was based on the belief that nations can not rise simply by running down their past — that breeds cravenness. A generation must have faith in its spirit and with an unencumbered soul partake and give knowledge. Today, the biggest charge against the policy makers of the independence era is that they were alien in spirit — they did not have empathy with the soul of India, had no ear for her voice whispering truths since times immemorial. For this reason even their progressive thought is damned. But Vivekananda, offering a synthesis of mind and matter, past and present, is still relevant, much more so perhaps than he was in his own times. For the times today have become worse, our nation builders are spent and jaded with no fire left in their veins, and little courage of conviction.

*Education as a Comprehensive Plan*

For Vivekananda, the regeneration of the country was to come through education, but that education would be conditioned by national compulsions, making it more relevant. "The ideal therefore is that we must have the whole education of our country, spiritual and secular, in our own hands, and it must be on national lines, through national methods as far as practical."<sup>17</sup> The words 'as far as practical' are a key to his vision. They reflect a flexibility, a readiness towards innovation, an eagerness to learn. This is by no means to suggest that Vivekananda was the only social reformer to lay great store by education. But he championed the cause of education in the most comprehensive way. He envisaged education as part of a programme to uplift the poor, incorporate the fringer, empower the alienated sections of the populace, correct the lopsided development of young men conditioned by western fashions, bring to India the fruits of the scientific revolution in Europe, provide spine to slumped backs. In essence, he visualized it as the hand that would in the eloquent words of Gandhi, later, 'wipe every tear from every eye'.

His was no armchair concept of the dissemination of education among the masses of India. He had very activist notions regarding the spread of knowledge by a dedicated band of young men. Almost never does he ask for succour from the government. This may have been an over wrought reaction, but since government initiative would have followed its own course inevitably, his preoccupation was to make the Indian people responsible for their own education—a premise later on to be championed, from a different plank, by Mahatma Gandhi. Vivekananda was a gifted orator who set afire the imagination of the young and old and this contributed to his appeal in India and abroad. With this powerful motivating force at his command he sought to build a vast organization across the length and breadth of the land, which would immerse itself in the task of spreading education. He remains a most impressive figure amidst the champions of education in those times, many of whom had political aims, and whose talk of educational reform formed part of a larger political vision. Some of them visualized government sponsored higher education to be the means to liberate the minds of the young, who would then better appreciate the ideas of liberty. Gopal Krishna Gokhale exhorted the people:

Let not the government imagine that unless the education imparted by colleges is the highest...it is likely to be useless and even pernicious; and secondly let not the achievements of our graduates in the intellectual field be accepted as the sole or even the most important test to determine the utility of this education. I think..., in the present circumstances of India, all western education is valuable and useful... To my mind, the greater work of western education in the present state of India is not so much the encouragement of learning as the liberation of the Indian mind from the threshold of old-world ideas...For this purpose, not only the highest but all western education is useful.<sup>18</sup>

The Deccan Education Society established in the Bombay Presidency by Tilak and Agarkar and the Rashtriya School by Vijapurkar at Talegaon were the early instances in the endeavour to spread education in the Deccan. But these experiments could not be sustained after some time. For Vivekananda, the role of the government could at best be that of a catalyst. He explained:

But it must always be we who build up a new India as an effect and continuation of her past, assimilating helpful foreign ideas wherever they may be found. Never can it be they; growth must proceed from within. All that England can do is to help India to work out her own salvation. All progress at the dictation of another, whose hand is at India's throat, is valueless in my opinion. The highest work can only degenerate when slave-labour produces it.<sup>19</sup>

This can be construed as the highest expression of the principle of Swadeshi in education, a principle that would become germinal to the freedom movement in the future. It is extremely relevant to quote his analysis of how the development of the Congress was related to education in India:

I cannot claim to have given much; my work is in another part of the field. But I regard the movement as significant, and heartily wish it success. A nation is being made out of India's different races...It will certainly end in the working out of India's homogeneity, in her acquiring what we may call democratic ideas. Intelligence must not remain the monopoly of the cultured few; it will be disseminated from higher to lower classes. Education is coming, and compulsory education will follow. The immense power of our people for work must be utilized.<sup>20</sup>

### *Eradication of Caste & Poverty*

Vivekananda not only had clear views on the advent of education but also of the goals of that education and how that education could be

transmitted to all Indians. It is a recurrent theme in his letters, interviews, speeches and writings. In the early years of the evolution of modern education in India there were other reformers who also addressed themselves to the task of eradication of caste and caste based poverty through education, but most of them had a sectarian orientation to their thought, due to which reason their appeal and influence, howsoever strong, became gradually marginalized, evoking hostility, as is often the fate of such thought. Most of them rejected outright all tradition and poured scorn on the upper castes calling for their dissolution. This sentiment, howsoever understandable, did not reflect statesmanship. In a society which is a mosaic of different, conflicting historical lineages, it is essential that the common policy, whilst keeping in mind the special duty towards one class, does not unnecessarily alienate the other. Effort must be made to let the generations evolve harmoniously, because, just as one class can not be held responsible for its backwardness, the other class can not be held wholly accountable for historical mistakes committed by previous generations. This generates a ceaseless mutual diatribe, and a saner approach, which can help in changing age old prejudices, is the first casualty. Even Jyotiba Phule, whose contribution in the field of education is enormous, became associated with an aggressive, militant anti-upper caste movement which alienated the centrist influences. A visionary in the educational field can not afford such a liability, as this affixes a label to his thought and later causes a backlash which imperils his contribution. In spite of Omvedt's laudation of "Phule's argument that knowledge, education and science were weapons of advance for the exploited masses" standing "in contrast to all elitist theories that sought to link western science and eastern morals and argue that Indians could maintain their (brahmanical) traditions while adopting science and technology from the west for material development,"<sup>21</sup> it was precisely for this reason that Phule's appeal could not become pan-Indian. For Swami Vivekananda, education was an instrument for the salvation of all. And yet, he constantly laid stress on special treatment for the deprived:

If there is equality in nature, still there must be equal chance for all,—or if greater for some and for some less—the weaker should be given more chance than the strong. In other words, a Brahmin is not so much in need of education as a chandala. If the son of a Brahmin needs one teacher, that of a Chandala needs ten. Far greater help must be given to him whom nature has not endowed with an acute intellect from birth. It is a mad man who carries coal

to New Castle. The poor, the down trodden, the ignorant, let these be your God.<sup>22</sup>

He had earlier reasoned, "There were many good things in the ancient times but there were bad things too. The good things are to be retained, *but the India that is to be, the future India, must be much greater than ancient India.*"<sup>23</sup> (emphasis added) We must keep in mind that in a class conflict the advantage mostly rest with the upper class who have entrenched themselves for centuries and a battle of attrition, notwithstanding revolutionary rhetoric, always affects the poor much more than it does the former. Any concept of education as a means of social reconstruction should be imbued with the soothing balm that assuages hurt sentiments all over, a quality so conspicuous in Vivekananda which the pronouncements of Phule despite all his notable accomplishments do not possess.

'The Education that India Needs' provides one with enough cues to the study of Vivekananda's thought.

From the day when education and culture etc. began to spread from patricians to plebeians, grew the distinction between the modern civilization as of western countries, and the ancient civilization as of India, Egypt, Rome etc. I see it before my eyes, a nation is advanced in proportion as education and intelligence spread among the masses. *The chief cause of India's ruin has been the monopolizing of the whole education and intelligence of the land, by dint of pride and royal authority, among a handful of men. If we are to rise again, we shall have to do it in the same way, i.e., by spreading education among the masses...* A great fuss has been made for half a century about social reform. Travelling through various places of India these last ten years, I observed the country full of social reform associations. But I did not find one association for them by sucking whose blood the people known as 'gentlemen', have become and continue to be gentlemen! Where, except in India, can be had millions of men who will cut the throats of their own father and brothers for six rupees? Sixty millions of Mussalmans in seven hundred years of Mohammedan rule, and two millions of Christians in one hundred years of Christian rule – what makes it so? Why has originality entirely forsaken the country? Why are our deft-fingered artisans daily becoming extinct, unable to compete with Europeans? By what power again has the German labourer succeeded in shaking the many century grounded firm footing of the English labourer? Education, education, education alone! What made the difference? Education was the answer I got. Through education, faith in one's ownself...<sup>24</sup> (emphasis added).

He was clear as to his priorities and wrote:

But our mission is for the destitute, the poor, and the illiterate peasantry and labouring classes, and if after everything has been done for them first, there is spare time, then only for the gentry. Those peasants and labouring people will be won over by love. Afterwards it will be they who will collect small sums and start missions at their own villages, and gradually, from among those very men, teachers will spring."<sup>25</sup>

But he injects a note of caution:

The peasants and labouring classes are in a moribund condition, so what is needed is that the moneyed people will only help them to regain their vitality, and nothing more. Then leave the peasants and labourers to look into their own problems, to grapple with it and solve it. But then you must take care not to set up class-strife between the peasants, the labouring people and wealthy classes. Make it a point not to abuse the moneyed class.<sup>26</sup>

This restraint was necessary. Since there is no greater distraction than animosity, and class-strife would divert the energies of the deprived into futile channels, rather than facilitate development.

The earlier flash back to European history was intended to bring out the similarities in the development of education in India and abroad, and to observe the logic of history. We now know that the spread of education inevitably results in a clash of aspirations and cultures in multi-ethnic nations. Therefore, the socio-economic dimension is not to be neglected in any educational policy intended to make a lasting contribution to the life of a nation. We have also seen how, in Vivekananda, two issues fuse into one whole, how he seeks to address the twin problems of class and caste through education. In a recent study of India's poorest districts, a not inconsiderable number, P. Sainath has shown how rural education has become a joke with little infrastructure and even less direction, and quotes Dr. Anita Rampal as saying, "The average 'efficiency' of our massive school system is less than five percent." Stating that current Indian educational funding is a shameless 3.5 per cent of the G.D.P. he says:

Cutting funds and calculated neglect hit the poorest and the weakest. Those at the bottom get weeded out in the very early stages of schooling. In one estimate, over 40 percent of children who drop out cite economic reasons for doing so... The actual gap between SC/ST literacy levels and those of the Non-SC/ST population grew worse between 1961 and 1981. . . . True, many of the rural poor don't go anywhere near the schools set for them. In some areas, that is a discerning judgement on the worth of what's being offered to them. . . . Where literacy has connected with peoples' lives, the attendance in schools has actually gone up.<sup>27</sup>

A hundred years ago, with this express problem in mind, Vivekananda had written to the Maharajah of Mysore:

The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost individuality. That is the great task before our people and princes. Up to now nothing has been done in that direction. Priest-power and foreign conquest have trodden them down for centuries, and at last the poor of India have forgotten that they are human beings. They are to be given ideas; their eyes are to be opened to what is going on in the world around them, and then they will work out their own salvation. Give them ideas—that is the only help they require, and then the rest must follow as the effect. Ours is to put the chemicals together, the crystallization comes in the law of nature. Our duty is to put ideas into their heads, they will do the rest. This is what is to be done in India. It is this idea that has been in my mind for a long time... The great difficulty in the way of educating the poor, is this. Supposing your Highness opens a free school in every village, still it would do no good, for the poverty in India is such, that the poor boys would rather go to help their fathers in the fields, or otherwise try to make a living, than come to the school. Now if the mountain does not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. If the poor boy cannot go to education, education must go to him. There are thousands of single-minded, self-sacrificing Sanyasins in our own country, going from village to village, teaching religion. If some of them can be organized as teachers of secular things also, not only preaching but teaching also. Suppose two of these men go to a village in the evening with a camera, a globe, some maps, etc. They can teach a great deal of astronomy, geography to the ignorant. By telling stories about different nations, they can give the poor a hundred times more information through the ear than they can get in a life-time through books.<sup>28</sup>

This is valid even today. The study by Sainath attests it. Times have changed considerably, but the condition of the poor not so considerably; according to some, not at all. We must change from a nation of self-servers to a people with a social conscience. That is what Swami Vivekananda was trying to do.

Earlier we have seen, how, as in some European countries, India has witnessed the rise of a privileged class bred on an elitist system of schooling. In the words of Krishna Kumar:

Linkages based on social class, caste, place of residence, personal background, and schooling combine in a manner that none of these can be separately spotted in situations where selection is being made for any kind of scarce opportunity such as higher personal education or lucrative employment. The name of the school is the outermost wrapping of this talisman, the only

part of it which is visible and which is flaunted in crucial exchanges that take place at the time of interviews for selection out of many available candidates.<sup>29</sup>

Pointing to English medium education as a segregating influence, he concluded:

For the social system as such, this kind of division of children into two streams, both of which have their own peculiar disadvantages, means a deep imbalance and chronic conflict. It also implies a disturbing force which on the one hand serves to create a cultural climate suitable for neo-colonialism and on the other, drains the society's stamina for fighting new-colonial control.<sup>30</sup>

This observation underscores the lack of a philosophy of education in India. The social alienation is the result of the warped schooling we provide our children. Due to the absence of social commitment in the youth there is a mad rush to compete for the lucrative positions in life. There has been no noticeable student movement in support of social issues born of awareness to non-political civil rights. Even movements, such as the attempted entry by Dalits in the forbidden temple of Nathdwara, have not evoked student support. The only socio-political issue that attracted the young was the Naxalite movement and that too degenerated into a release of pent up frustration in acts of vandalism. Outside West Bengal, students from elite institutions like St. Stephen's, Delhi School of Economics, Miranda House, and Lady Sri Ram College enrolled as volunteers but for a short, exciting period. "It would however appear that these students were attracted more by the romance of Naxalite philosophy. They were not able to stand the rigours of village life and, in due course, the 'mod' naxalites returned to their hearths."<sup>31</sup> In this climate of primary concern with material advancement the spirit is hopelessly neglected. This is the reason, that the source to the world of academics is gradually drying up even as talent becomes scarce in university faculties.

### *Man-making*

Vivekananda's concept of education is one with the *philosophia perennis*.

What is education? Is it book learning? Or is it diverse knowledge? Not even that. The training by which the current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful, is called education. Now consider is that education, as a result of which the will being continuously choked by force through generations is now well nigh killed? Under whose sway, why mention

new ideas, even the old ones are disappearing one by one? Is that education which is slowly making man a machine? It is more blessed, in my opinion, even to go wrong impelled by one's free will and intelligence than to be good as an automaton. Again, can that be called society which is formed by an aggregate of men who are like lumps of clay, like lifeless machines, like heaped up pebbles? How can such society fare well?<sup>32</sup>

Schools and Colleges even today are aspiring to become production units applying assembly-line techniques to mass produce professionals—engineers, doctors, lawyers, bureaucrats, obscuring the greater need of producing good and sensitive men and women. All the problems of the future, inequality, both class based and gender based; neglect of the environment; social strife arising out of scarcity of resources and the consequent national and international shock waves from this upheaval, have as their common source, this one deficit in the character of generations—crass insensitivity to our milieu. Whatever we are in our professional capacities, we must basically be human beings endowed with sensitivity and decency. All the imbalances in our outlook, leading to mindless competition radiate from our inner barrenness. Only one who perceives the inner light in himself can help others to see it and light up their lives. Even in his own times, Vivekananda was compelled to lament:

The education that you are getting now has some good points, but it has a tremendous disadvantage which is so great that the good things are all weighed down. In the first place it is not a man-making education. A negative education or any training that is based on negation is worse than death. . . . Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making, assimilation of ideas. If you have assimilated five ideas and made them your life and character, you have more education than any man who has got by heart a whole library. If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages in the world, and encyclopaedias are Rishis.<sup>33</sup>

People may scoff at the use of spiritual ideas as anti deluvian and retrograde. They have only to hear 'highly educated professionals' subscribing to the most banal caste and religion based discrimination, or see the fare of hate continuously served to young impressionable minds in the Sangh Parivar schools, or read in the newspapers how the most archaic Islamic fundamentalism, and training in advanced weaponry is imparted in Taliban schools, to realize the perilous position we find ourselves in today. The problem is not too much of 'spirit' but

too much material selfishness masquerading as spirit, and to distinguish between the two, we have to discover 'spirit' anew. Schooling should foster a sensitivity to the deprivation and suffering around us. Students should be enabled to realize their collective sense of gratitude not only to their parents, but to those visionaries as well who were instrumental in establishing the institutions which make education feasible. They should be grateful to those masons and labourers who laboured in erecting college and hostel buildings, often for a pittance as wages, and whose sons would never be able to study in those institutions. The day they feel that hunger is universal, and that poverty knows no creed, would be the first in a journey towards enlightenment, when they would no longer be ensnared by the trappings of bigoted religions. They would ask themselves, why the poor of the Hindu and the Muslim community are incited to kill and loot each other by their leaders? Or why did the three semitic religions flowing out of one West Asia fight ceaseless crusades amongst themselves. The poetry of religion would then acquire new meaning for them. They would know that the real aim of education is not to judge but to understand with compassion the different streams of thought and belief.

### *Secular and Spiritual*

For too long the word secular has been one of abuse. For much too long, 'secular' and 'spiritual' have been two poles of thought in popular perception. This has landed contemporary public opinion in the collective lap of the obscurantists of all faiths. We have to see, as Vivekananda saw when he wrote:

Generally, all knowledge is divided into two classes, the *Apara*, secular, and the *Para*, spiritual. One pertains to perishable things, and the other to the realm of the Spirit. There is, no doubt, a great difference between these two classes of knowledge, and the way to the attainment of the one may be entirely different from the way to the attainment of the other. Nor can it be denied that no one method can be pointed out as the sole and the universal one, which will serve as the key to all and every door in the domain of knowledge. But, in reality, all this difference is only one of degree and not of kind. It is not that secular and spiritual are two opposite and contradictory things; but they are the same thing, the same infinite knowledge... This one infinite knowledge we call secular when it is in the lower process of manifestation, and spiritual when it reaches the corresponding higher phase.<sup>34</sup>

The quest for inner balance is eternal. Ever since the dawn of

history teachers have tried to guide students on the path of self-discovery, through ceaseless experimentation with diverse methods. Whatever be the means the end is the same.

Plato's *Meno* begins with the question, "Can you tell me, Socrates, is virtue to be taught?" The answer of Socrates is, that virtue is not taught but "recollected". Recollection is a getting of one's self together, a retreat into one's soul. The doctrine of "recollection" suggests that each individual should enquire within himself. He is his own centre and possesses the truth in himself. . . The function of the teacher is not to teach but to help to put the learner in possession of himself."<sup>35</sup>

The *Bhagavadgita* exhorts:

*Yogi Yunjita Satatam  
Atmanam rahesi sthitah  
Ekaki yatachittatma  
Nirasir aparigrah*<sup>36</sup>

To realize these objectives, education, as enunciated by Vivekananda, should be multifaceted. Every academic discipline and level of teaching is equally important. In the dazzle of a World Bank sponsored literacy blitz, the study of the humanities must not be relegated to the backyard. They too have their place in society as do the professionals. Or else, only an indifferent silence will greet the plaintive question of Jakob Burckhardt: 'What class and strata of society will now become the real representatives of culture, will give us our scholars, artists and poets, our creative personalities? Or is everything to turn into big business, as in America?'<sup>37</sup>

#### *Philosophy, not Syllabus*

It has been this writer's endeavour to show how Vivekananda's philosophy of education is of abiding relevance, through a brief historical analysis of the development of education in modern India, and prior to that in the West. In the quest for education with a human face, the thought of Vivekananda is of supreme importance. It is not impossible that points be raised about the 'chauvinistic' and the 'amorphous' nature of his programme. But then, Vivekananda was not outlining a cast iron structure. He was speaking in terms of principle, and in those days when 'everything was to be built from nothing', thought and direction was what mattered. We live in a cynical

age. We call the basest examples of self-centred materialism—mindless experiments in nuclear explosion, for example—a proof of success, and the word altruism has almost disappeared from the lexicon of people who have ‘arrived’, for whom the ceaseless jostling for social trinkets is the one purposive movement of their lives. Vivekananda has not laid down the syllabus of what should be taught, rather he has sought to give a philosophy which should underlie that syllabus. And in that philosophy the human spirit shines as the guiding light of all progress, it remains for the times to evolve a system tailored to its own needs, keeping in view not so much the letter, but the spirit of his thought.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. *Selections from Educational Records*, Vol. 1, pp. 130-131, cited in A.R. Desai.
3. In his will, Cecil Rhodes “sketched (his) idea of the British Empire, and beyond its bounds, of the great commonwealth of peoples linked together by the bond of English Language and culture serving the cause of peace among men.” His aim was “the extension of British rule throughout the world, the occupation by the British Settlers of the entire continent of Africa, the Holy Land, the Valley of the Euphrates...the whole of South Africa...the ultimate recovery of the United States of America as an integral part of the British Empire, the inauguration of a system of Colonial Representation in Imperial Parliament, which may tend to weld together the disjointed members of the Empire, and, finally, the foundation of so great a Power as to hereafter render wars impossible and promote the best interests of humanity.” See Hans Kohn, *A History of Nationality in the East* (1929), pp. 94-95.
4. G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History* (1942: rpt. Pelican, 1984), pp. 439-440.
5. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics* (Oxford, 1996), p. 453.
6. G.M. Trevelyan, p. 531.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 533-534.
8. Russel was imprisoned for six months in 1918 and lost his fellowship in Trinity. This severe action was in response to his not so pernicious statement, that the American soldiers would be employed as strike breakers in Britain, “an occupation to which they were accustomed when in their own country.” In the U.S.A., that other bastion of so called enlightened liberal democracy so respectful of the right of expression, he was denied employment by the City University of New York on the grounds that his works were “lecherous, libidinous, lustful, venerous, erotomaniac, aphrodisiac, irreverent, narrow minded, untruthful and bereft of moral fibre.” See the respective *Oxford Dictionaries of Philosophy and Twentieth Century History*.
9. G.M. Trevelyan, p. 534.
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36. *Bhagwadgita*, Chap. VI, Shloka 10.
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