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Whence and Whither?

Just getting them out of bed, bathed, buttoned up, brushed, breakfasted, with books and something edible for lunch stuffed in their backpacks and off to school is about all parents can do, educationally, for their kids these days. What young, eager minds will learn there, we all trust, someone smarter and wiser than we worked out long ago.

Not so. Many of Asia's school systems are World War II vintage, Western clones, copied wholesale, right down to the science and math bias and secular allegiances. India does not have a system designed to teach her unique heritage or to impart her profound wisdom. It is an elitist system, geared to produce engineers and doctors while remaining oblivious to the nation's larger needs.

Worldwide, educational systems are being thrown back on the drawing boards for examination--or autopsies. Fundamental questions are being asked. Is it a school's job to produce good citizens? Or parents? What's the goal of education? How does faith fare in a fact-laden pluralistic classroom? Historian Dr. Arnold Toynbee could have been reading a crystal ball when he wrote: "The 19th century movement in the West replaced religion by technology. But in the 21st century, this movement will be reversed by a movement back from technology to religion." Clearly, nations are disillusioned by the kind of citizens their schools now churn out. India, too, is not happy with her educational situation. The rote method has come under fire, though it has certainly produced great minds. The midday school meal and other strategies to increase attendance have still not won over the villagers. Nationwide, school attendance is barely 47%. And the extreme emphasis since independence on left-brain science curricula, flaming the consumerist instinct, has left pitholes in the aesthetic conscience. In this three-part series, we start by interviewing two Hindu educationalists and then look back at India's oldest holistic learning system where spiritual instruction invigorated the academic. We then jump forward in time to the British era and its clerk-producing schools and conclude with contemporary experiments and visionary thinking targeted for millennia 2,000.

School in a Forest 3,000 Years Ago

In ancient Indian times, "school" was one teacher, and not for everyone. With a few legendary exceptions, learning was reserved for boys of the brahmin class who often left their home to live with a married guru/teacher at his abode. While tending his paddy fields, flocks or cattle, they learned. Schooling included first and foremost refining the mind, body and emotions and developing character--awakening virtues and abilities such as concentration, willpower, relationships, compassion, integrity and the spirit of selflessness, the idea that serving humanity was the noblest fulfillment and expression of learning. Boys were tutored in Sanskrit and all aspects of priestcraft. Depending on the teacher, other subjects might be taught--e.g. a instrumental music, singing, philosophy, metaphysics, medicine/healing, astronomy, astrology, languages, oratory, political science, agronomy, animal husbandry and forestry sciences. Dividing instruction into "secular" and "religious" was inconceivable. All life was religious--all matter connected by an invisible, sacred force--thus all learning was interrelated. One learned that pujas could be more effective when certain stars and planets were positioned favorably. Crops grew better when the nature spirits, adhibautas, were honored in simple ways and then thanked with the heart.

Brahmin girls remained at home, learning homemaking and mothering arts and responsibilities, but also acquiring cultural skills when possible. Education for girls in other subjects, though uncommon, was not taboo in pre-Muslim India. Women enjoyed many social and academic freedoms. Two specific learning avenues were open--the path of the Sadyodvaha for girls age 7-16 who had an upanayana ceremony and studied the Vedas in preparation to join her husband in household homa rites, and the more solitary path of the brahmavadini, the highly learned, unmarried philosopher/ teacher.

Those of non-brahmin castes, the majority, were trained in the profession of the father along with religious values, customs and traditions respective to their community and sect. Whatever else a child learned was from sources as diverse as traveling merchants, temple festival dramas, roaming bards, village elders, songs, folk ballads and the numberless lesson-filled stories told each twilight about Gods, Goddesses, heroes and heroines and acts of love, courage, humility, prowess and piety.

In the mid-first millennia, a few famed urban centers of learning gained notable

repute. Banaras in the North and Madurai and Kanchipuram in the South are recorded as cities where Hindu scholars and mystics met in forums and an enlightened combustion of intellect and spiritual fire were a reality.

British Education--Making Clerks

Through the medieval Muslim period of Indian history--roughly from the 6th century to the era of European colonization of India--education remained the exclusive right and societal responsibility of the brahmin class. For a complex set of reasons, brahmin girls lost their Vedic educational freedoms during this period. Reclassified on par with sudras, they were discouraged from learning altogether. Various writings appeared claiming that education erodes a woman's modesty and motherliness, her two greatest assets.

When the British colonized India, they established an educational program designed to train loyal, English-speaking clerks and officers to administrate India profitably and peaceably. Boys prayed to get into this Indian Civil Service for money and to hobnob with the sahibs. But a grain of poison was packed into the post. The British mandated that government schools ridicule and mock the Hindu religion as part of a strategy called MaCaulayism. It worked. In a short time, Indians themselves were the most vicious critics of Hinduism and the chivalrous champions of British society, government and its religion, Christianity.

Seeing their brightest youth turning against them, a core of Hindu stalwarts began founding colleges to at least escape the British bias against India. The Ramakrishna Mission and Arya Samaj most notably joined this crusade and established schools nationwide. These schools maintain a good standard of studies, but none teach Hinduism.

Banyan Tree Schoolhouse in Every Town

On October 31st, 1933, a dhoti-clad Mahatma Gandhi infuriated British parliamentarians in a speech in London, blaming them for destroying his country's educational system. Unimpressed by the fancy British schools, he railed, "Our

village schools were not good enough. He [the British] came with so much paraphernalia, buildings, and so on. Your own surveys show that our ancient schools have slowly disappeared because there was no recognition [or support] of them [by your administration], and schools patterned on the European pattern were too expensive and could not be taken over [by us.] This very poor country of mine is ill-able to sustain such an expensive method of education. Our state should revive the old village school master and dot every village with a school for boys and girls."

As Gandhiji railed against the crumbling British learning apparatus, there did exist schoolteachers in most villages, the "school" sometimes no more than a verandah or the shade of a banyan tree. The British were educating only a few upper class boys and ignoring the masses. A high British official in the Bombay Presidency recorded as early as 1826: "There is hardly a village in India in which there is not at least one school where young natives are taught reading, writing and arithmetic, upon a system so economical--from paying a handful or two of grain to perhaps a rupee per month to the school master according to the ability of the parents--at the same time, so simple and effectual that there is hardly a cultivator or petty dealer who is not competent to keep his own accounts with a degree of accuracy beyond what we meet in our own country." Another document exposes the tragedy: "Of the 533 [native Indian] institutions for education now existing in this district, I am ashamed to say that none receives any support from the [British] state." (to be continued...)

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Sidebar: Beware! Films Are Teachers Too

Interview with Thiru C. Subramaniam

Thiru C. Subramaniam, now 85--eminent statesman, educationalist, agronomist, politician, government advisor--fought with the 1940s Free India movement for which he was twice imprisoned. He has held important educational and political offices and served as governor of Maharashtra from 1990 to 1993.

Hinduism Today:Fifty years after independence, we are still following the British educational system. Why wasn't an Indianized education system a top priority of the Nehru government?

Thiru C. Subramaniam:Actually, even during the freedom struggle days, we began to consider the type of education that would be required in independent India. We adopted Mahatma Gandhi's idea of "basic education"--book learning combined with manual work. He chose spinning, charka, as the work. We tried this education using only spinning as the manual part, but it did not prove a success and was given up. We should have diversified.

The British government was only interested in producing clerks and lower-level officials for their administration. In independent India, we gave new emphasis to engineering and scientific education. Thus, it is wrong to say that we are simply following the British educational policy. In scientific and technical manpower, we are second only to the US. Where we have failed is achieving education for all boys and girls. Kerala is a good example of education for all girls and boys. Even though their per capita income is not high, their quality of life has considerably improved, mainly because of education.

HT:What do you mean by "quality of life?" Quality values or better housing, more material goods?

CS:Quality of life in the sense of better living conditions, longevity, services available to the people. Kerala's high living standards show us that educating women is very important. An educated mother will naturally send her child to school, and a home atmosphere with an educated mother is critical for the best development of a child. Any society which neglects women cannot make any progress. Swami Vivekananda said this over and over. He said it is like a bird trying to take to air. Unless both wings are strong, it cannot fly. But still, in the Hindi belt, many families hesitate to send their daughters to school, especially to a coed school. They want all-girls schools. And that requires more qualified female teachers. But, ironically, because they do not send their daughters to school, there are no educated women or teachers for them. Unless women's literacy is stepped up, no other attempts at improving education will be successful.

HT: In a pluralistic society, whose responsibility is it to impart moral values to children--parents or schools?

CS:Yes, that is the question, the trouble. We are a multi-religion society. Even in Hinduism there are many sects. If you teach Saivism, the Vaishnavites object, naturally. So what do you teach? It can't be one religion's teachings, but rather what we could call a "perennial philosophy," human values appreciated by all faiths. Values that cannot be disputed. "Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram"--truth, love and beauty. If you stress these, no one can say this is not also part of religion. You must be truthful in thought and deed. You must show compassion. You must enjoy beauty and dislike vulgarity. But if we say religious teaching, immediately the "which religion" question arises.

HT:Fifty years ago, even illiterate elders possessed common wisdom, and a fondness for philosophy. This seems missing today.

CS:It is only in the upper strata of society that cultured and educated grandparents took care of their grandchildren and kept up the traditions. In rural poor homes, no such thing happened. The poor women didn't know anything about religion or dharma.

HT:It surprises me to hear you say this. Village people, it seems, definitely had some kind of stronger faith, or philosophical outlook, 50 years ago that seems to be fading.

CS:Well, I don't know. I come from a village. I know the village. We can't say that they had any wisdom or religious knowledge. The common man was a superstitious lot. Actually, today--because of radio, TV, films and other media--he is better informed, even though there are, I admit, adverse effects. It's a grey area. On the whole, our society is better informed because of the open air-waves, open visual communications media.

HT:Still, what can we do to improve the quality of life for the youth in rural areas?

CS:Materialism--arising out of technology and mass consumerism--has overtaken humanity as a whole. Attaching more importance to material prosperity rather than cultural and spiritual aspirations is a problem. Science and technology are being misused. Look around. The world's so-called "developed" countries with material prosperity are realizing that human happiness is at a very low level. That is why you will find an awakening to spirituality and yoga in Western countries that is more dramatic even than in India. It is important not to abandon science and technology, but to practice what Swami Vivekananda called "the synthesis of science and spirituality."

HT:Do you see any bright spots in India, educationally or otherwise?

CS:Actually, I find there is an increased religious spirit in India even in the village. New temples are being built, old ones renovated. Decades ago Mahatma Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru might have attracted millions of people, but today it's the gatherings around spiritual leaders that are the most attended. We are realizing that spirituality and morality are important. At the very same time, TV and films are offering uncensored sex and violence to the masses. They are raising havoc. Kids even learn how to rob from the movies. While we can create great educational systems that promote true values, valueless visual media everywhere counters this completely. So it is not only our educational system that needs to be examined, it is also the mass media. Unless they can be guided to project higher human values, whatever value courses we put in the schools are totally undermined. So before we rewrite textbooks and change syllabuses and curricula, we need to address this TV/movie dilemma.

HT:Back to the spirituality/materialism question. Don't leaders of nations have to state the case for spiritual education more strongly?

CS:Yes. Look at Russia. It was technologically a superpower, even ahead of the US in space exploration. Overnight it collapsed. In the first speech Gorbachev gave after this, in which he analyzed why it fell, he used the word "spiritual" seventeen times! "We neglected the spiritual aspect of life," he said. Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts become relevant here. He insisted over and over, "I am not against technology, but we should not become slaves of science and technology." While most are thinking how to have more science and technology in the universities, the spiritual aspects should also be attended to. Fortunately, the spiritual fire is still burning.

Sidebar: Even Rotten People Can Read!--Going Beyond Literacy

Dr. P. K. Ponnuswamy is the new vice-chancellor of the University of Madras, his alma mater where he took his doctorate in physics. He has been a member of the Academic Council of Jawaharlal Nehru University and, in 1984, received the Best University Teacher Award from the Tamil Nadu government.

Hinduism Today:What are the true ideals and purposes of education?

P. K. Ponnuswamy:Intellectual capability and self-direction are the essential qualities of survival for the human race. Thus, developing these is the purpose of education.

HT:Statistically, it is estimated that 50% of the world's illiterates will be in India in the 21st century. Does this shock you?

PKP:True, the statistics are alarming. Over the past 40 years our policy makers have allocated sizable resources for education of our people, but they have been poorly managed. Also, the population explosion has been a great obstacle and should be controlled.

HT:Today, even literates seem to be "uneducated." Cultural disregard and violence are on the increase. Is our educational system to blame?

PKP:Mere literates are exposed to lots of low-minded literature and develop unwanted behavior. This is not education. About violence, it is inevitable in a fast-changing society. The blame is not on the students. It is the elders who are to be blamed. Good schools rarely produce bad students.

HT:What is the long-term solution?

PKP:Students need more dedicated teachers to enthuse them. It is very important that our curricula be revised to include more outstanding biographies of great personalities, men and women, living and historical, who would inspire young minds towards greatness, high-mindedness.

HT:Job-oriented studies are essential for India where unemployment is a problem, but shouldn't schools be teaching basic social values too?

PKP:A decent job is essential to enable a person to lead a materially comfortable life, but it does not guarantee contentment in life. That comes from moral, ethical, cultural and other factors. Yes, acquiring these principles depends upon the kind of education we provide.

HT:In the absence of traditional religious education at school, is it possible to teach simply universally accepted morals and values?

PKP:In our pluralistic society, no one set of teachings can meet all the needs. We have to go beyond religion to create a curricula containing the biographies of great personalities who inspire the highest humanitarian values, at the same time expressing positive attitudes towards our technologically-minded era.

HT:Aren't we still blindly following the British system of education?

PKP:If there is a good thing out of the British rule over India, it was the educational system! There is no point criticizing it without finding an alternative system which is better.

Sidebar: Vivekananda on Education

Text:

By Sri Swami Vivekananda

"Our pedagogues are making parrots of our boys, and ruining their brains by cramming a lot of subjects into them. Goodness gracious! What fuss and fury about graduating, and after a few days, all cooled down! And what is it they are learning but that what religion and customs we have are all bad and what the Westerners have are all good!

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. It is entirely a negative education.The child is taken to school, and the first thing he learns is that his father is a fool, the second thing that his grandfather is a lunatic, the third thing that all his teachers are hypocrites, the fourth that all the sacred books are lies. By the time he is 16, he is a mass of negation--lifeless and boneless. And the result is that fifty years of such education has not produced an original man in the three presidencies. Every man of originality that has been produced has been educated elsewhere, and not in this country, or they have gone to the old universities once more to "cleanse" themselves of superstitions.

We have had a negative education all along from our boyhood. We have only learned that we are nobodies. Seldom are we given to understand that great men were ever born in our country. Nothing positive has been taught to us. We do not even know how to use our hands and feet. We have learned only weakness.

The present system is nothing but a perfect machine for turning out clerks. I would thank my stars if that were all. But no. See how men are becoming destitute of shraddha and faith. They assert that the Gita was only an interpolation and that the Vedas were but rustic songs. They like to master every detail concerning things and nations outside of India, but if you ask them, they do not know even the names of their own forefathers up to the seventh generation, not to speak of the fourteenth.

What does it matter if this higher education remains or goes? It would be better if the people got a little technical education so that they might find work and earn their bread, instead of dawdling about and crying to be served.

Is that education which is slowly making man a machine? It is more blessed, in my opinion, even to wrong, impelled by one's free will and intelligence, than to be good as an automaton.

Well, you consider a man as educated if only he can pass some examinations and deliver good lectures. The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion--is it worth the name? The education that you are receiving now in schools and colleges is only making you a race of dyspeptics. You are working like machines merely, and living a jelly-fish existence.

What is education? Is it book-learning? No. Is it diverse knowledge? Not even that. The training by which the nerve current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful is called education. The ideal of all education, all training, should be character-making. 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, 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. "The ass carrying its load of sandalwood knows only the weight and not the value of sandalwood." If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages in the world, and encyclopedias are the rishis!"