

36. Some Ancient Educational Ideals

In any country education to serve its true purpose must be related to the genius of the people, and any scheme for modelling the education of the future must be related to the past. Now, in India, there is a general awakening in educational matters. So, it is desirable that we have a clear idea as to the ideals which obtained in educational matters in the past, so that in attempting to model our present education on the lines of the past, we may adapt them to the modern conditions and at the same time ensure continuity in the nation's distinctive function in the world.

To be able to understand the educational methods and ideals, we must, in the first place, have clearly before our minds a correct conception of (1) man and his nature, and (2) the ideals of the nation. The ancient Aryans from time immemorial have held that man has four aspects—the physical, the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual, and no education was considered perfect if it did not meet the requirements of these different aspects of man. Man is not merely the physical body, nor merely the senses, nor merely a bundle of emotions, nor is he an intellectual being only. He is all these and something more. He had his own inherent capacities and tendencies and the object of education was to draw out his inherent capacities, allow free scope for the display of his special capacities, and make it possible for him to make a distinctive contribution to the society to which he belongs. The noblest ideal that the Aryans ever had before them was to develop the individual

their own way and they are still necessary and useful for a very large number of people. But temples and ceremonies and all that go with them will be left behind if they are going to be obstacles in the way of expansion of the human heart and consciousness, instead of being a help. Time was perhaps when they were a necessary help and perhaps even today they are necessary to many; but nothing shall stand in the way of the human soul realising the Larger Soul in the Universe and feeling a unity running through all the differences we see around us, in the way of man realising every man and woman to be part of that Larger Self, in the way of feeling a mystic unity with all that lives; because it is this which matters more in religion than ceremonies or philosophies.

I do not deny there is a place in Hinduism for shrines, for ceremonies, for physical talismans and all the rest of it; but the emphasis should be on the wider and deeper view of things which naturally should take precedence over other minor considerations. I for one would use every help available in my religion for the benefit of the community, just as I may use an electric battery or a telescope. I should be foolish if I throw them aside because they do not show me my God at once. At the same time, I shall be thrice foolish if I blindly believed that these are my religion and I can realise God only through them.

The future religion seems to me to be a religion of God revealed in the Man. In times gone by, we have had God revealed as the Light, as the Sun, as Dharma, as Beauty, as Purity, as Magnificence, as Father, as Son, as Child; but we are now reaching a stage in evolution when God is being revealed to us as Man. If we wish to avoid being laid aside as back numbers, we have to sense this great ideal which is coming to be realised as an inevitable anchorage for humanity and help in the consummation of the Ideal. To realise God through Man is the new religion

which is being slowly but unmistakably revealed and he will be wise who hitches his waggon to that star and realises in advance what the generality of mankind will realise perhaps sometime hereafter.

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and make him give his best to the country, nay, to the whole world. The whole system of education was based upon these fundamental ideals.

The whole span of man's life was divided into certain great stages corresponding to the larger stages in the growth of human society, and the nation's activities were also grouped under the corresponding heads. The original Varna Dharma and Asrama Dharma were based upon these ideals. Just as the human embryo reproduces on a small scale the stages through which life had evolved, so in the life of an individual all the experiences of the ancestors were lived again on a small scale. There was what we may call an appreciable parallelism between individual development and racial development.

In the early stages, usually up to the 7th year, no particular attempt was made to "impart" education to the child. Then began the period of studentship—Brahmacharya. The age at which this commenced depended upon the equipment and temperament of the pupil. In the case of the intellectually advanced student it usually began in the 8th year but in other cases it began at the 11th or 12th year. The period of studentship proper extended over 9 to 48 years according as the pupil wanted to master a part of the scriptures only or acquire all knowledge. It was after completing the student life that one was allowed to enter married life. The instruction received by the students included not only cultural and academic subjects but items of knowledge having a distinct bearing upon the life he had to lead as a Grihastha. Then came the later stage when he withdrew from the worldly activity and devoted himself to service on a larger scale along spiritual lines.

With regard to the subjects taught to the pupils, there was a good deal of variety. The student's individual predilections played a great part in the subjects taught to him.

The four great divisions going by the name of castes were more rational in those days, and they were in fact mere classifications of humanity made on the principle of temperament and occupation. The verse in the Gita that says "the four castes have been created by me based upon temperament and occupation" is ample proof of the principle underlying the system. It is well known that the ideal has deteriorated and the system now exists only as a shell without any life. The person whose temperament marked him out for a teacher belonged to the Brahmana caste and his education was based upon the duties he had to take up later on in life as a Brahmana. Those in whom valour and prowess and capacity to organise showed forth as prominent characteristics naturally went to the ruling class and they had their own corresponding education. The commercial instinct marked out another type and so also the unskilled manual labourers. These were, and are natural divisions. Difficulty came in only when birth was made the sole criterion to judge a caste and not as the Lord put it, "temperament and occupation". It is not for me here to show that in ancient times the caste system was not at all rigid and caste was determined by temperament and occupation and not by birth alone, though in most cases, for a very long time in the early Aryan Society, birth went along with temperament and occupation.

After having classified humanity into these four groups, education was planned to suit all of them. That was why in the case of the Brahmana the studentship began much earlier than in the case of the Kshatriya, in whose case more time was given to the development of the physical side than to the other sides.

Education in those days was mostly residential. The student went to and lived with his teacher. Generally schools were situated not in the cities but in the midst of groves. The surroundings were beautiful, there was plenty

of space to move about and there was very little of any big structure in those times. As pupils, distinctions of rank were not recognised. King or peasant, boy or girl, had the same kind of treatment. We hear of princes being sent to their preceptors' houses. Sri Rama went with Viswamitra to learn the use of the weapons. Sri Krishna had his tutelage under Rishi Sandeepani. Even in later times when the University at Taxila was very famous and drew crowds of students into its portals, princes from far-off cities used to come there.

Teachers and pupils lived together all day and all night. The physical body of the pupils was kept active and healthy by the regular physical services they had to render to their teachers. They got up very early in the morning, had their prayers, went out and had their bath, and for this they had generally to walk a long distance. They washed their own clothes and those of the teachers also; then they went round and begged alms, and thus the life was so ordered that there was ample scope for the healthy development of the physical side of the pupils.

The teacher in ancient India was very much respected for his learning. He was usually one who was well versed in various branches of knowledge, and commanded the respect of all people. His personality was usually remarkable, and those who passed through his hands had the distinct mark of his personality stamped on them. The contact of the pupils with such a teacher evoked the highest emotions in them. The whole atmosphere was pure, serene and high. The spirit of service and comradeship was developed in the students to a remarkable degree and the living example of the teacher went a very long way towards the achievement of this object. As for intellectual development, the method adopted by the ancient teacher was in some respects different from that which obtains in modern times. They paid very great attention to memory,

in the first instance. Pupils were recommended to learn by rote a lot of things which they in their later life would be able to understand, and some of the ancient scholars were very famous for their almost superhuman memory. The story is told of Pandit Vasudeva Sarvabhauman who wanted to get mastery over *Nyaya*. At that time Mithila was the great centre for *Nyaya* and the Mithila University was the only possessor of a text-book on *Nyaya* and did not allow others to copy it. So the Pandit went and learned the whole text-book by heart and then started a first grade College for the study of that subject in his own University at Navadweepa. The memory of even the modern Pandits is remarkable. But at the same time the method adopted was such as to induce original thinking in the pupil rather than thrust new ideas into his brain. The teacher will sometimes give a short sentence (an aphorism) and the pupil will be asked to go and meditate upon it, and until he has done so to the teacher's satisfaction, he will not be allowed to proceed further. Many of you would have heard of the story of the pupil who was asked to find out the true nature of Brahman. After long meditation he came and said that Brahman was the food which went to build the physical body. The teacher shook his head and said "No". After another long period of meditation he came to the conclusion that Brahman was his senses. Again the teacher shook his head, and again he went and meditated until at last he realised that Brahman was above all these things. The pupil was trained to think for himself and learn for himself by meditation and realisation.

In the case of even incorrigible pupils, proper methods were adopted to bring out the latent faculties in them and teach them to read, write, count and so on. The sons of King Sudarsana of Pataliputra were incorrigibly ignorant and they would not learn things. They were put to training in the hands of Vishnu Sharma. He found that the only

thing which interested the princes was to rear pigeons. So he began their education from pigeons. He built a pigeon house for them and asked them to feed the pigeons and bring them up. As their number increased, they had to count them and mark them from one another. They were marked by the different letters of the alphabet. They were thus taught to learn the alphabet, then to combine the alphabets into words, and so on, until through this they were taught addition, subtraction, etc., and also something of house-building and engineering beginning with dove-cots. In the end they were fit to receive lessons in ethics and politics, which have come to us today in the shape of Hitopadesha and Panchatantra. This story goes to prove that while the teacher recognised that it was necessary to induce thinking faculties in the pupils, he suited the method and the subject matter to their temperament and propensities.

To the ancient Aryans everything was based upon religion. Religion was not then used in the narrow sense in which it is used now. All activity is God's and all knowledge is in essence Divine Knowledge and everything that they did or thought about or planned had for them a deeper meaning. Though a division was kept between the Paravidya and the Aparavidya, the higher and lower knowledge, one was related to the other and all knowledge was considered to be the means to the attainment of the higher knowledge. In fact, the history of some of the sciences shows that their developments can be traced to the religious necessities of the people. Geometry began when the Aryans started to construct their sacrificial altars, and extraction of the square root and other problems of Algebra were developed therefrom. The computation of elements in the triangle which again was related to the shape of the altar, led to the discovery of Trigonometry, and to determine auspicious moments and sacred occasions, based upon particular conjunctions of planets, they had to develop

Astronomy. The Vedas which are considered to be the most sacred of the Aryan scriptures depended for their accuracy and proper intonation on rhythm and that led to the sciences of Phonetics, Metre and Music. The ancient sages were well versed not only in the so-called scriptures but in other sciences as well. Rishi Agastya was the founder of the great seat of learning in Madura—"Tamil Sangam". He was famous for his proficiency in Medicine, Grammar and Astrology.

Elementary education as such in ancient times was more or less confined to the family. But later on schools were founded for practising figures, writing, calculation, and so on. *Lalita Vistara* mentions their existence at the time of Lord Buddha. Elementary schools were mostly held under trees in the open air and, if the weather was unfavourable, in temporary sheds. Later on this was left to the senior pupils to look after — a kind of monitorial system introduced in England by Andrew Bell. Secondary and still higher education was mostly imparted in forests under the guidance of Rishis who came there in their old age. But we hear of such institutions even in the courts of the enlightened kings—the Videhas, Kurus, Panchalas, and so on. There were Vedic Schools for teaching the Angas—Phonetics, Metre, Grammar, Etymology, Religious Practice and Astronomy, and there were also special schools in Science, and later on there also developed schools for the study of Law.

Discipline in the old system was anything but brutal. Manu distinctly says a teacher should impart instruction without doing any injury to the pupil and by using mild and sweet words. In extreme cases corporal punishment was resorted to, but that existed only on a very limited scale.

No education was considered complete without the finishing touches of the University life and so there came

to exist great Universities — the Universities of Taxila, Nalanda, Vikramasila, Navadweepa, and so on.

The Universities in ancient India were entirely residential. It was considered that a University should contain at least 21 Professors well versed in Philosophy, Theology and Law; pupils were given free tuition, free boarding, and students who went to an educational institution — be he a king or a peasant — lived and boarded together.

Then, a word on the great Universities of ancient India. Ashramas, Viharas and Parishads were great centres of culture and attracted large numbers. One is surprised to read of the very large numbers that crowded to a single University. The University of Vikramasila accommodated 8,000 people. They speak of Kulapatis in those times; the technical meaning of the word is 'one who feeds and teaches 10,000 students'. Kanva was one such. Kalidasa speaks of the various kinds of knowledge taught and learnt under the guidance of Kanva. There was no problem of accommodation in those times. The sages lived in forests and there was plenty of room to move about, there was no jostling of any kind, one never felt cramped. They speak of 500 as the number of students who can learn under a Professor, and we may take it to mean that the students went into groups of 500 for purposes of study of a special branch of knowledge presided over by a Professor. One is struck with amazement when one hears of the famous University of Takshasila (modern Taxila). Historians are never tired of showering eulogies on it. To go to Taxila was to complete education and without it no education was complete. The Jatakas are full of references to Taxila—over 100 in fact. We glean a good many details about it from them. Mention is made of world-renowned Professors who taught the three Vedas, the Kalas, Shilpa, Archery, and so on. King Kosala and Jivaka, the famous physicians, were students of the University, the latter learning medi-

ine under Professor Rishi Atreya. Great stress was laid on the study of Sanskrit and Pali literature as well. It is said that as many as 16 different branches of learning were taught; among them were painting, sculpture, image-making, and so on. The renowned grammarian Panini and the politician Chanakya, we hear, received their education at Taxila.

Nadiya (Navadweepa) was another great centre of Sanskrit learning in later times and people went there to learn the Vedas, the six Darsanas, the Mimamsas (Poorva and Uttara), Yoga and Tarka. It was the Muhammadan invasion of 1203 that destroyed this centre just as the Huns annihilated the great University at Taxila.

Nalanda was another great University, the site was chosen by Nagarjuna and the structure begun by Arya Deva, though it required four successive kings, Sakraditya, Buddha Gupta, Tathagata Gupta, and Baladitya, to finish the architecture and lay out the gardens. This centre is said to have accommodated 10,000 monks and provided for instruction in Logic, Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy, Philosophy, Metaphysics, History, Grammar, Pali, Sanskrit, Music and Tantric Medicine. Students flocked here from all parts of Europe and Asia. The University consisted of 6 colleges, its observatories and the nine-storeyed library *Ratnadadhi* were world-famous. Logic was a special field of study in Nalanda and the standard for this branch of study was very high. Unlike Taxila, technical sciences were excluded at Nalanda; that was because this University was intended primarily for the monks.

Vikramasila University, situated on a precipitous hill in Magadha on the banks of the Ganges rose also to great fame in the 8th century, and flourished for almost four centuries. It was destroyed along with Nalanda about 1200 A.D.

I do not propose to deal with later Universities, though several great centres sprang into existence after the Moghuls established themselves in this land and became patrons of learning.

India had a glorious past and had an excellent system of education—Elementary, Secondary and University. It is not at the present time possible to order everything on the lines which obtained in old times. But it is possible (and to my mind it seems to be necessary, if India is to make her distinct contribution to humanity), to organise our educational system on the basis of the ideals which our ancients so jealously guarded. It is no use trying to imitate the western systems; there may be no harm in assimilating them, especially their form side, into our fabric, but the essential basis must be rooted in our inherent genius and traditions. Let me conclude by mentioning what seem to me to be the points we might have in our mind in developing any educational system in India. "The veneration for learning, the taking it as a vocation, the simple life of the student, the loyalty to duty, the recognition of Dharma", these adapted to present-day conditions will alone make for a good, rational, national system of education.