

The Realisation of *Self* or *Atmagnana*: An Educational Ideal in Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of Education

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Abstract: This paper makes an attempt to highlight the relevance of the educational philosophy of Swami Vivekananda with a view to suggesting it as a model for formulating changes in the pattern of the existing system of education in India. This is being done keeping in mind the unprecedented and irreparable changes that have occurred in the attitude of the students, teachers, educationists and the public towards education, employment and life in general in the post globalization period of India. In this context 'unprecedented changes' refer to students' increasing obsession with Western culture and other contingent habits leading to a perceptible aversion towards indigenous knowledge, teaching methods, learning objectives etc. After making a close study of Vivekananda's philosophy of Education the researcher agrees with the view that Vivekananda's philosophy of education which advocates man-making education and awareness of paths to attaining *atmagnana* as the goal towards which students should be led to. This study makes use of textual analysis and interpretation of primary and secondary literature in the disciplines of Indian Philosophy, Education and many others so as to identify some tenets of the philosophy of Vivekananda that could form the basis of our argument.

Key words: Education, Brahman, *Atmagnana*, indigenous education, man-making, spiritual.

Introduction

Swami Vivekananda's philosophy of education should be considered undoubtedly as one of the most significant educational philosophies of India in the existing situation. One would certainly find some of his ideas on Education as a workable solution for addressing certain critical issues plaguing Indian education today. It is well known that his works have been studied extensively and some of his principles of education have been highly commended not only in India but in various parts of the globe as well. Going one step further we can say that several committees formed for suggesting reforms in education have emphasized the relevance or suitability of some of the educational tenets of Sri Vivekananda in the field of education. Many

scholars have highlighted Vivekananda's vision of education and have urged the government, policy makers, and educationists etc. to implement his ideals in the field of education. As a result of which many governments in the past have also established centers of learning in the name of Vivekananda. Furthermore, one can also claim that Vivekananda's thoughts have made an impact even at the global level. One may cite Fredrico Mayor's (Director-General of UNESCO, 1993) appreciation of the similarity between Vivekananda's educational philosophy and the principles of education reflected in the constitution of UNESCO.

I am indeed struck by the similarity of the constitution of the Ramakrishna Mission which Vivekananda established as early as 1897 with that of UNESCO drawn up in 1945. Both place the human being at the centre of their efforts aimed at development. Both place tolerance at the top of the agenda for building peace and democracy. Both recognize the variety of human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of the common heritage. (2003, pp234-235, Qtd in Prabhananda)

Therefore one is right to conclude that it would be highly improper and short sighted for any researcher to ignore or overlook the ideals of Vivekananda while discussing issues and problems of education in India.

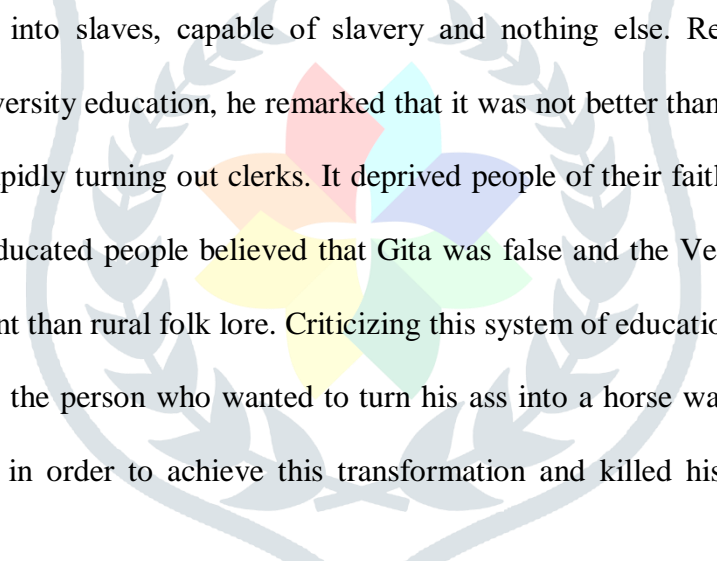
Swami Vivekananda says about education. He asserts:

We must have a hold on the spiritual and secular education of the nation. Do you understand that? You must dream it, you must talk it, you must think it and you must work it out. Till then there is no salvation for the race. 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 merely and entirely a negative education. A negative education or any training that is based on negation, is worse than death. 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 sixteen he is a mass of negation, lifeless and boneless.

Swami Vivekananda does not dismiss English education as totally useless. While admitting that English Education does have some merits, he highlights the disadvantage of the English Education. He calls English

education negative education and not man-making education. What does he mean by “negative education”? According to Vivekananda English education is negative because its edifice lies on the foundation of negation. That is to say, English education attempts to look down upon the forefathers or the previous generations of the students as ignorant, fools and lunatics. Secondly, English education calls teachers ‘hypocrites’ and thirdly English education calls Indian sacred books a bundle of lies. By calling them so, English education valorizes Western knowledge and makes the students infer that the knowledge produced on this land or indigenous knowledge as a ‘bundle of lies’ and instills in the student a disrespect for our sacred texts. Naturally, this only trains the Indian mind to dismiss everything that is Indian as superstitious and worthless.

Pradhan (pg, 33-34, 2018) remarks that Swami Vivekananda opined that the contemporary educational system in India

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...turned men into slaves, capable of slavery and nothing else. Regarding the prevailing university education, he remarked that it was not better than an efficient machine for rapidly turning out clerks. It deprived people of their faith and belief. The English educated people believed that Gita was false and the Vedas were no more significant than rural folk lore. Criticizing this system of education Swamijee compared it to the person who wanted to turn his ass into a horse was advised to thrash the ass in order to achieve this transformation and killed his ass in this process.

Vivekananda terms such products of English education as ‘lifeless and boneless.’ Why does he say so? Isn’t Western education more informative than Indigenous education?

In this regard Vivekananda says that

“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”

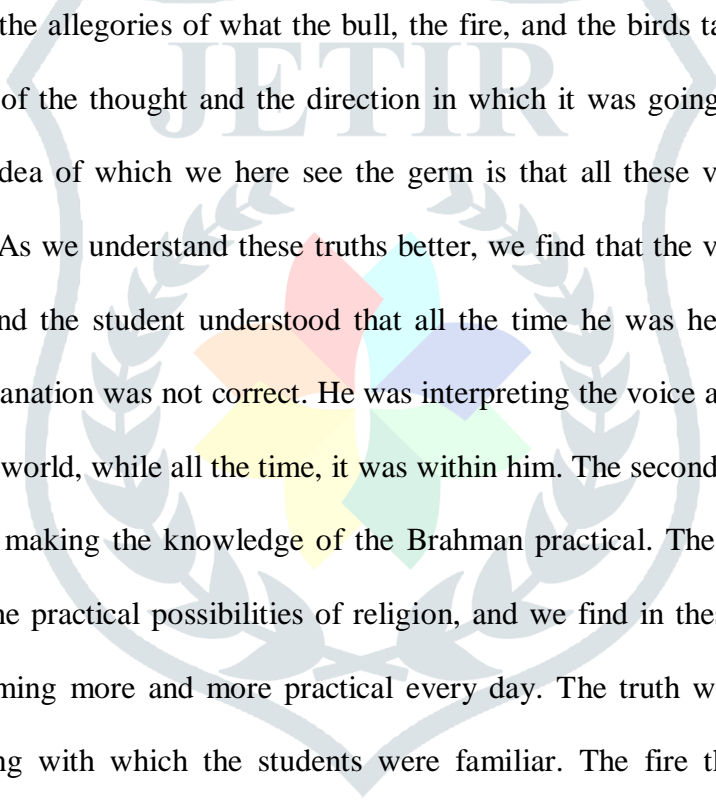
Vivekananda suggests that our education system must have a hold on the spiritual and secular education of the nation. In this context what Vivekananda meant was though Western education gave a great deal of information, our students could not make use of it as they could not relate it to their life. They fail to assimilate it. He concludes saying 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.” (Pg 301-304 The Future of India, CWV Vol 3)

Besides advocating, spiritual and secular education of the people, Vivekananda also proposes practical methods of teaching. In a speech delivered in London, Vivekananda narrates the story of Satyakama taken from ChandogyaUnpanishad. Satyakama goes to a sage to study Vedas and requests him to take him as his disciple. When the sage asked him about his parents Satyakama revealed the name of his mother and told him straight away that he did not know the name of his father. The sage who was very impressed by the young Satyakama took him as his disciple. He gave the boy four hundred cows, sent him to the forest, and asked him to return only when the herd had turned to a thousand. Satyakama obeyed his master and started taking care of the cows.

In course of time Satyakama started hearing many voices from among the cattle in the herd and aspects of nature. Those were the voices of the bull, the fire, and the birds. These voices made him understand the concept of Brahman - that ‘man’ was a part and parcel of the all-pervasive ‘Brahman’. Thus having understood the meaning of Brahman, Satyakama came back to the sage and told him that his herd had become a thousand.

The sage looking at his face at once realized that Satyakama had understood the meaning of the concept of Brahman and so asked him who had taught him the meaning of Brahman. Then the boy revealed the truth that, he had been taught by the bull, the fire, and the birds, but insisted that he would like to learn the same from his guru because he believed that only knowledge learnt from a guru would do him supreme good. Then the sage taught him the concept of Brahman which he had already learnt.

Vivekananda narrated this story only to drive home the point that the knowledge that we acquire should be through practice and from a guru which alone will ensure that our knowledge becomes valuable because it is spiritual and secular. If we take this as the right model of education we can conclude that Western knowledge that is being disseminated in the existing system of education becomes a mass of meaningless information and remains in the students undigested and unassimilated. The Western knowledge given to our students is unrelated to the life of the students in the Indian context and it doesn't teach them the spiritual dimension of our life: birth and existence on this earth that is the knowledge of Brahman. Thus it becomes useless. In this context it would be quite educative to read the commentary of Vivekananda on the story of Satyakama:

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Now, apart from the allegories of what the bull, the fire, and the birds taught, we see the tendency of the thought and the direction in which it was going in those days. The great idea of which we here see the germ is that all these voices are inside ourselves. As we understand these truths better, we find that the voice is in our own heart, and the student understood that all the time he was hearing the truth; but his explanation was not correct. He was interpreting the voice as coming from the external world, while all the time, it was within him. The second idea that we get is that of making the knowledge of the Brahman practical. The world is always seeking the practical possibilities of religion, and we find in these stories how it was becoming more and more practical every day. The truth was shown through everything with which the students were familiar. The fire they were worshipping was Brahman, the earth was a part of Brahman, and so on. (pg 312 Practical Vedanta II, CWV Vol 2)

From this we understand that it is this kind of education that Vivekananda calls man-making education. According to him the realization of Brahman was the ultimate goal of all education. Furthermore, we know that all along Satyakama was hearing the voice of the truth which had manifested itself in different forms. Satyakama assimilated the concept of Brahman through the agency of the teacher. Vivekananda points out further saying that a teacher in those days made his student realise the truth by taking him through the familiar. Satyakama all along didn't realise that the voices that he was hearing was his inner voice which is

nothing but *Atmagnana*. The objective and the method of the teacher's teaching aimed at helping students to attain this highest form of knowledge i.e. *Atmagnana* through practical means.

Conclusion

Having examined the indigenous systems of education that were in vogue in preindependence India and the changes introduced by the British during their rule and its continuance in a different form after India became independent one cannot help but say that the ancient systems of education paved the way for making a living by a vocation and also gain an awareness of one's self whereas the British system uprooted the individual from his cultural heritage and made him a parasite feeding on the money doled out by his employer. In short the ancient systems of education made the Indian native self-dependent whereas the British system of education created servants who had to be employed by someone else for a living. In this scenario one can also conclude that Vivekananda's philosophy of education promises both secular education and spiritual education. Furthermore, it is the spiritual education or *Atmagnana* or Realisation of the Self which alone can pave the way for development of one's personality and only such education can preserve the ancient wisdom and cultural heritage of the country.

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