

Education for a Faith in the Future¹

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Abstract

In the history of recorded time there had never been another century more dominated by paradox than the 20th century – the formidable backdrop of the current decade. Great adventures and explorations were contrasted by devastations and disillusionments. While the evolutionary spirit seems intent upon opening up a vast avenue for a new humanity through scientific, technological and progress in human relationship, an ominous sense of uncertainty and anxiety characterises our life – a situation that has brewed confusion in practically every aspect of our existence. Education is that which liberates – had been a cardinal doctrine in Indian prudence. Has that doctrine grown anachronistic? Is the sweeping spell of pragmatic, if not totally utilitarian, forces at work in the field of education necessarily the highest ideal because it is modern? It is time to have a deeper look at the very purpose of education – a question that spontaneously leads to the far more profound issue of the very purpose of life. Is there an ideal or a vision that can challenge the prevailing trends and offer us a way out of the present gloom? The talk will attempt a brief examination of these issues in the light of Sri Aurobindo's vision of human destiny and education.

Of Roots and Branches

With the proliferation of newspapers and newsmagazines as well as the gradual increase in the number of their pages, reports and essays on important issues and topics, sometimes through special supplements, have become a regular feature and one such recurrent topic, no doubt, is education. Also more volumes

on the subject have been published, including a series by the UNESCO, during the past three decades than ever before. My observation in this regard, of course, is limited to publications in English. It shows on one hand that public interest in the subject has grown wider, but on the other hand, if this speaker can be pardoned, there is reason for us

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to wonder about the nature of this wider interest, for a wider interest alone is not a sure sign of a serious or deeper interest. The interest the media has cultivated among an even wider readership in a category of news that are billed out as art, culture and literature are rarely anything more than entertainment, glamour and items for titillation.

No doubt, the level to which the concept of Education can be diluted has a limit, unlike topics of culture such as art or literature. The danger in the case of Education is less perceptible. When something ugly or vulgar is presented as art or music or dance, we can shut our eyes or ears to it, we can very well do without them, but when Education is presented as a discipline entirely devoted to external accomplishments, mastering ever new inventions in technology, promotion of career and prosperity, we may not find anything amiss in it because we need such opportunities; there is nothing vulgar or apparently degrading in them. The worldwide challenge of competitions and the demands of what is often termed as fast life does not give us respite enough to reflect on the question if what we accept as Education today is the genuine stuff, if Education did not have some greater role to play in our life than obtaining to us the aforesaid accomplishments and vocational facilities.

That brings to mind a brief dialogue, but a significant one. Thoreau and Emerson both had been students at Harvard. Once while the two celebrated alumni were reminiscing over their days in that famous university, Emerson said that by now their alma mater had

several branches of Education. Thoreau, who was better acquainted with the ground realities, observed, "Yes, indeed, prolific branches there are; but what about the roots"?

Life, it was agreed, was the greatest university, but a certain outlook was required to be cultivated in the young to transform their bare experiences in the world to lasting lessons. From its very indeterminable beginning, Education in its classical sense had two aspects: first it cultivated in the student a quest for knowledge and next trained him or developed in him a skill for supporting himself in the existential sense as well as for playing a purposeful role in the community. Innumerable testimonies are there in the Indian tradition of literature and philosophy to suggest that the teachers of yore succeeded in striking a balance between these two ideals of Education for a considerable length of time. They studied the *pravritti* – the inherent inclination of the student and accordingly helped him to choose his *vritti* or vocation. If the vocation was already fixed by heredity, the pupil was taught the way of taking equal care, if not more, of his *pravritti*, that was generally in consonance with his *swadharma*, the inner law of his being.

It will take long to identify the historical forces that disrupted this balance, resulting in those who cared for their inner self-breaking away from the so called worldly life and those who led a normal life as social beings distancing themselves from their inner self. This unfortunate development, by now, has reached its culmination. We rarely remember that beneath our surface self-dominated by our senses, craving for

pleasure and pride and given over entirely to satisfaction of ambitions and desires, we had an inner self thirsting for truth and the knowledge of a different order.

But, such is the constitution of man that the satisfaction his surface self seeks does not come. Hence, the multiple innovations in the means of enjoyment and search for pastures new for pleasure.

This is the psychological state of affairs that had inevitably given a diabolical boost to consumerism. As a thinker observed, once we knew necessity to be the mother of invention whereas today it is the invention that is the mother of necessity. Our illusory needs, illusory hopes for joy are continuously whetted by the militant intelligence behind consumerism manipulating our taste and dream. By and by it is the culture of hedonism that prevails and blinds us. "Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing", says Earnest Becker, in his *Denial of Death*.

A Confession and a Question

May I be allowed to bring in the confession of a gentleman, as a representative illustration of the pattern at work? This is from a successful scholar, about ten years senior to this speaker, who as an entrepreneur proved equally successful but had stopped short of reducing himself to a robot. I quote:

"You know, like many other youths of the immediate post-independence decade I carried in my mind the residues of idealism that had inspired the best among my preceding generation for so much sacrifice. In the changed

circumstance, I had two ideal ways open before me. I become an element in the bureaucracy and serve the country honestly or contribute to the economic progress of my country through some independent enterprise. I chose the latter, for I had some dynamism in me. I do not know when I forgot my mission. It was, I'm afraid, a gradual but fast process of decline that my mind was unable to detect. I was amidst a corrupt gang of business associates and I could not have competed with them without being corrupt. To my amazement my college-day friends who were equally idealistic like me and some of whom were by then either in politics and power or in the administrative service and whose help naturally I needed from time to time, seemed to have subjected their minds to the same brand of morphine. Thus together we continued to slip farther and farther down along the path of moral paralysis. But there was still that puny substance called conscience somewhere deep down the self and at times it would hum a sad song; there was somewhere in me that forgotten love for silence and serenity that would nostalgically remind me of Davies we studied in our High School: *What is this life, if full of care; we have no time to stand and stare?* But the demand of exigency, of strike in the factory, of betrayal by a distributor, blackmail by hoodlums, sudden fall in export, to mention of a few, would drive those precious moments away into oblivion. My children grew up amidst affluence and in their show of loyalty to me shouldered the burden of my wealth as well as my worry, but without the idealism that had launched me into the adventure or the knowledge of the

struggle I had put into it. My grandchildren grew up amidst a new culture or call it a lack of culture if you please, and divided their time between pleasure on one hand and the care of their early diabetes, blood pressure, etc. I was condemned to look on as one of my grandsons, in his early thirties, was dying in the intensive care ward, suffering from a heart ailment. He had returned from the West, with the highest training available in management. Poor boy! The last query he made, before closing his eyes finally, was regarding the very first export deal he was handling. While the family wept, I only wondered, what was the use of all his super specialisation in management if he could not manage his heart? What is the education we imparted to him if the very last question he must ask should be nothing nobler than export? What was the meaning of our having inspired him to study more and more, do better and better when it led to his forgetting that there were more worthy issues for reflection at that moment than an export deal? Now, in my eighties, I wonder what the meaning of my own life was either. In search of happiness I spent the whole life in tension. I read the other day, what I had read fifty years ago, that making a cosy bed-room at a cost of one million rupees is no guarantee for even one minute's sound sleep. The truth overwhelms me now; but why had it no effect on me at all fifty years ago? I tell you, my friend, something was grotesquely wrong in the education we received. True, colleges in our time had not been cursed with careerism as it is today, but as I deeply reflect on what went amiss, I find that nothing in our system

told us that life was not all that we lived on the surface, that there was an inner life, that there was an element called soul, that our true happiness or sense of contentment depended on it."

Consumerism thrives on keeping us forgetful of the inner life. Glamour and dazzle constitute the life consumerism would like us to live; momentary sense-satisfaction, through power or pleasure, is the purpose for which we live. This even could pass, but the problem is it is proving to be more and more frustrating. There are some well-researched studies in this regard and I refer to one of them, *The Price of Privilege* by psychologist Dr. Madeline Levin. She observes that students today are much more smart and intelligent. As their parents have more resources to spend, they buy them cell phones, cars, other luxuries and provide them with enough money to spend at will. But they don't give them love or intimate company. They have greater expectations from their children in terms of social and economic success. They drive the kids into the race for excellence, not excellence as human beings, but as status-achievers. And what is the result? I quote a few lines from Dr. Levin's study: "We know that this group of kids has three times the rate of depression and anxiety disorders as ordinary teenagers, as well as substantially higher rates of substance abuse, cutting and suicide. The most dangerous feelings a child can have are of self-hatred; yet middle-class parents are unwittingly instilling those feelings by expecting so much."

The situation conjures up in my mind a comical scene: At the middle of a road there is a boulder, obstructing smooth passage. Atop the boulder there is a

lamp. If you ask why is the boulder there, the answer is, to hold the lamp. Should you ask why is the lamp there, the answer is so that the pedestrians or drivers avoid dashing against the boulder. We embrace tension in order to live, and we must live in order to go on experiencing tension. The illusion is both justify each other; the reality is both cancel each other, thereby rendering the whole thing absurd. The list of factors adding to this condition of absurdity is long and it is better not to refer to them at the moment.

Values Then and Now

Philosophers and thinkers have identified many a sign that differentiates man from the other creatures on our planet. One of them is, be he conscious of it or not, man lives by some values. Not that the value had to be necessarily lofty. The noted social reformer of Gujarat, Ravishankar Maharaj, devoted years to change the life of a tribe of hereditary burglars. One day, as he talked to a young practitioner of the tradition, he said with disarming frankness, "Maharaj, if you ask me to give up my practice, I will do so. But the fact is, Goddess Lakhmi, buried under their floors of householders, shouts out to me as I pass by, asking me to liberate Her. Only then I dig a hole on the wall and enter the house and coup out the treasure."

Alas, the values in which the masses believed have faded out one by one. Once men were ready to die for their kings; the situation is a distant memory. Religion was the most powerful, the most meaningful and satisfying value people upheld in their life and with which they

justified their existence. But today the tradition is kept alive more for political and egotistic purpose than for true faith. If Gods and Goddesses are worshipped with great hullabaloo, it is not for devotion, but for festivity and rivalry among local formations of collective ego. I am told that in a city that had been the home of some of the greatest intellectuals and spiritual giants not only of India but also of the world, a film star is ritualistically worshipped as a deity, making the devaluation of divinities complete.

If the age of institutional religion is past, spirituality, the only alternative that could play even with greater effect the role religion at its best played, had not yet made a bold debut, not to speak of filling up the vacuum.

We all know how Curzon's move for partition of Bengal created such an upheaval that the British rulers had to agree to "unsettle the settled fact". But later developments brought about not only the partition of Bengal, but also the partition of India, thereby planting the most damaging blow to our value of nationalism and patriotism.

Family values had broken down. This is not to say that the family relationship had vanished. That has so far survived the changing life patterns. But what had received the most horrendous jolt is the institution of human relationship, the trust men could have in men, thanks to the fact that most of the sophisticated criminals, swindlers of the people's treasures and saboteurs of national security and manipulators of legal provisions to serve their selfish interest are people with handsome degrees and diplomas. The respect the educated

commanded till the other day, the term Vidya associating in the popular imagination a personality like Vidyasagar, the epitome of truth and nobility, is only a memory. In other words, the moral value that went with education had been reduced to zero. That reminds me of what the late Dr. Malcolm Adisesaiah, noted educationist who held an important position in the UNESCO, once told us at Pondicherry: London was bombarded during the World War II. The state of aviation being what it was, the degree of accuracy with which the pilots hit their targets was surprising. The mystery was solved when, at the end of the war, it was found out that the bombers were those German students who got their higher education in London as British Council scholarship holders.

And who must occupy the vast space vacated by such values? The answer unfortunately is not any new set of values, but wrong values. They assault intelligence, common sense and higher tastes. Their immediate preys are the students. Let me refer to one such value. Several studies have shown how pop and rock music contributes to both physical and mental problems of the young. I quote from one serious study of the problem, *The Closing of the American Mind* by Allan Bloom:

“...It has risen to the current heights in the education of the young on the ashes of classical music, and in an atmosphere in which there is no intellectual resistance to attempts to tap the rawest passions. Modern-day rationalists are indifferent to it and what it represents. The irrationalists are all for it. ... But rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal to sexual desire

— not love, not Eros, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored. It acknowledges the first emanations of children’s emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimatising them, not as little sprouts that must be carefully tended in order to grow into gorgeous flowers, but as the real thing. Rock gives children, on a silver platter, with all the public authority of entertainment industry, everything their parents always used to tell them they had to wait for until they grew up and would understand later...

“Ministering to and according with the arousing and cathartic music, the lyrics celebrate puppy love as well as polymorphous attraction, and fortify them against traditional ridicule and shame. The words implicitly and explicitly describe bodily acts that satisfy sexual desires and treat them as its only natural and routine culmination for children who do not yet have the slightest imagination of love, marriage or family...”

The Indian film lyrics are perhaps not lagging behind in such unabashed suggestiveness, for the clever culture-vultures know that most healthy inhibitions could be eliminated through means that have some pretensions to culture. Academically sound studies have established how this process of reckless exploitation in the name of culture had found as its intimate allies in drug and violence, directly related to mercenary consumerism. In an era of rapid growth of global communication and exchange, we cannot expect such developments to remain confined to any one continent. In fact, it has already become a world-wide phenomenon in the

absence of any bulwark against the nefarious network, often enjoying the patronage of powers that be.

What is wrong with this tide – this collective resignation to hedonism – is not its immoral and unethical character, for one can argue that morality and ethics change from time to time. The situation is bad because it is against the spirit of evolution, because it is a negative reaction to the call for an adventure in consciousness. Hedonism not only fails to deliver the promised pleasure, it drains one of one's zests for life, and leads to either self-destruction or anarchy.

So far I have only articulated the obvious, for nobody can really be unaware of this situation, whether one be involved or not in the world of education. And, needless to say, the obvious is a picture of gloom. Is there any remedial possibility involved in the spirit of education itself? Sometime ago I read a summary of the *Education for All* global monitoring report covering up to year 2005. The situation might have slightly changed, but it says that approximately 103.5 million children do not go to schools. About 800 million adults are illiterate. Of this seventy per cent live in nine countries of the sub-Saharan Africa and East and South Asia, "notably India, China, Bangladesh and Pakistan". The report calls upon the governments concerned to undo the situation, but what is surprising and disheartening, those who have commented upon the report have, without exception, looked at Education as technology-intensive training. One comment stresses the importance of trade among nations and wishes education in the developing countries to be accordingly oriented.

Here lies the crux of the problem. Trade and technology are indispensable no doubt, but we seem to have forgotten that they are only parts of the external aspect of Education; they must not become synonyms of Education. They are designed to serve man; man is not designed to serve them. They are by no means to be shunned, for the evolutionary time-spirit has placed them at our disposal so that we become more efficient masters of our environment. But trade and technology do not constitute progress, they are external aids for progress and the true progress is a growth in consciousness. Once in a while we come across an essay on Montessori or Bernstein or Sadler and their sophisticated theories, but they are in academic magazines with meagre circulations and are like a cry in the wilderness, for no theory or doctrine could stand the sudden and powerful sway of education for sake of trade and technology.

The Crisis and Beyond

As Sri Aurobindo looks at the situation, "At present mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny; for a stage has been reached in which the human mind has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered and can no longer find its way." I wonder if anybody could find a better definition of Education than what the Indian scriptures had given: *Sa vidya ya vimuktaye – Education liberates.*

Education can of course liberate us from this impasse, for it has the greatest support for that action in the process of

evolution itself, for, in a sense, evolution itself is a route along a gradual realisation of liberation. The manifestation of the earliest forms of life as plants out of the apparently lifeless matter was a step towards liberation of the imprisoned consciousness. A far greater degree of freedom of consciousness – and an exercise of that freedom in infinitely variant ways – was possible with the emergence of the primeval creatures, from worms and insects to the whale and the dinosaur, from the birds to the beasts of incalculable varieties. That urge for freedom inherent in Nature, for releasing its possibilities and potentialities, took a new and hitherto most significant turn with the emergence of man and, needless to say, man is the only creature who had never stopped growing. With relentless zeal he had not only adapted himself to the changing environment, but also had obliged the environment to adapt to his demands. Emerging from the state of primeval Nature he had created for himself new worlds of art, architecture, literature, music, philosophy and the spiritual quest. His activities and achievements in all these spheres have again meant nothing but the gradual realisation of his own potentialities, a joy in the freedom of experience, adventure and expression.

If the process of evolution itself is a movement of consciousness realising its own freedom from its bondage to material and other limitations, the 20th century we have just left behind had been the witness to the most momentous events and ideas ensuring greater freedom for man in several fronts. Imperialism, colonialism, monarchy and feudalism all

collapsed ensuring man's social, political and economic freedom. Revolutions and reformations, emancipation of women from social taboos and discrimination, end of apartheid, all point in the same direction. Science and technology have played their role in according a greater dignity to the individual.

But these facts of outer freedom do not come to much – they even are vulnerable to misuse – unless there is achieved the other freedom, the freedom from ignorance. Sri Aurobindo believes that the realisation of such a freedom is not only a possibility, but also is a certainty inherent in the very nature of evolutionary developments. The true role of Education is in preparing and helping man to arrive there – at a new phase of evolution. Man is neither an accident nor a freak of Nature. He is an evolving being, awaiting his fulfilment. No doubt he had come a long way from his primitive state via a stage dominated by vital or raw life impulses; he has been a mental creature for long and has achieved marvels with his intelligence and intellect. But proud of intellect though we may be, Einstein warns, "We should take care not to make the intellect our God; it has of course, powerful muscles, but no personality." (*Out of My Later Years*)

As the Italian thinker Preme Levi stated, "Normal human beings are biologically built for an activity that is aimed towards a goal." A goal always implies a call to go farther than where we are. Till the other day, so far as India was concerned, the ennobling goal of freedom kept the youths inspired. Since the achievement of that goal, we have been fed with the illusion of false goals, bereft of nobler values. We must replace

them with the most optimistic goal, an aspiration for transcending the present dimly lighted state of our consciousness and entering a new phase of consciousness. In his great works such as *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo had elaborately explained this inevitable future and we the teachers could capture from them a thrilling new purpose for our endeavour. Once we subscribe to a sublime vision, feel inspired by an extraordinary destination, our approach to our work spontaneously receives a new impetus.

Towards an Integral Education

The Mother founded the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education as a part of Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry to enable the student to apply to his life to the extent possible the vision of Sri Aurobindo. To a question why any degree or diploma is not bestowed on a student, she made the following observation:

“For the last hundred years or so mankind has been suffering from a disease which seems to be spreading more and more and which has reached a climax in our times; it is what we may call ‘utilitarianism’. People and things, circumstances and activities seem to be viewed and appreciated exclusively from this angle. Nothing has any value unless it is useful. Certainly, something that is useful is better than something that is not. But first we must agree on what we describe as useful – useful to whom, to what, for what.

“For, more and more, the races who consider themselves civilized describe as useful whatever can attract, procure or

produce money. Everything is judged and evaluated from a monetary angle. That is what I call utilitarianism. And this disease is highly contagious, for even children are not immune to it. At an age when they should be dreaming of beauty, greatness and perfection, dreams that may be too sublime for ordinary common sense, but which are nevertheless far superior to this dull good sense, children now dream of money and worry about how to earn it.

“So, when they think of their studies, they think above all about what can be useful to them, so that later on when they grow up they can earn a lot of money.

“For them study has no other purpose, no other interest.

“To learn for the sake of knowledge, to study in order to know the secrets of Nature and life, to educate oneself in order to grow in consciousness, to discipline oneself in order to become master of oneself, to overcome one’s weakness, incapacities and ignorance, to prepare oneself to advance in life towards a goal that is nobler and wiser, more generous and more true... they hardly give it a thought and consider it all very utopian. The only thing that matters is to be practical, to prepare themselves and learn how to earn money.”

The passages tell us all that Education ought to be and all that it is not today. Without a collective awakening to the ignored purpose of Education, the rapid corrosion of life by utilitarianism inevitably leading to hedonism, cannot be checked. It is the elite who are expected to realise this, to begin with. They can influence the Educational authority or machinery to stop the

macabre deterioration in the system we have already discussed. We must not feel helpless or too weak to do anything in this direction, for the evolutionary time-spirit will be with us. Despite the current signs to the contrary, the secret aspiration in our consciousness will guide us through the present imbroglio.

I conclude with a few more passages from the Mother – on her integral approach to Education:

“The education of a human being should begin at birth and continue throughout his life.

“Indeed, if we want this education to have its maximum result, it should begin even before birth; in this case it is the mother herself who proceeds with this education by means of a two-fold action: first, upon herself for her own improvement, and secondly, upon the child whom she is forming physically. For it is certain that the nature of the child to be born depends very much upon the mother who forms it, upon her aspiration and will as well as upon the material surroundings in which she lives. To see

that her thoughts are always beautiful and pure, her feelings always noble and fine, her material surroundings as harmonious as possible and full of great simplicity – this is the part of education which should apply to the mother herself. And if she has in addition a conscious and definite will to form the child according to the highest ideal she can conceive, then the very best conditions will be realised so that the child can come into the world with the utmost potentialities. How many difficult efforts and useless complications would be avoided in this way!

“Education to be complete must have five principal aspects corresponding to the five principal activities of the human being; the physical, the vital, the mental, the psychic and the -spiritual. Usually these phases of education follow chronologically the growth of the individual; this, however, does not mean that one of them should replace another, but that all must continue, completing one another until the end of his life.”