
Book Review

An Alternative Perspective on Education

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The book discusses the prevalent apathetic situation of education in India. It is an attempt to provide a holistic solution engraved in the *Bharatiya* roots for the prevailing problems and challenges of education. The author examines several provisions of the educational policies, committee recommendations, administrative structures and curriculum of the country's educational system that deals with the development of the individual, society and the nation holistically. Atul Kothari's careful and incisive analysis of different stages and aspects of education demonstrates how their discursive coordinates are actually set by the needs of a 'culture', which is inconsistent with the culture of *Bharatvarsh*. According to him, the majority of the country's problems stem from a fallacious education system. In independent India, it

was anticipated that the nature and composition of the country's education will be in consonance with the social and national needs as guided by the *Bharatiya* principles, but this did not happen. Consequently, there is a dire need to bring a radical change. The book comprises short essays written in simple English language dealing with 'how to deal with struggles for lighting up the path of education'; puts forward a solution-based approach rather than listing problems and, thereby, persuades the reader to develop an alternative perspective which is far-stretching and farsighted with respect to the current scenario of education. According to the author the state of education in India is in such a mess that it cannot be redeemed by a differential approach towards policy execution. But it also needs a shift in pedagogy and attitudes compatible with indigenous

knowledge and traditions. The essays are based on the original experiences garnered through the innovative experimentations carried out in schools, colleges and universities for identifying the issues and problems that beleaguer education today.

The book is instrumental in understanding the problems and challenges of education in India; which deal with the public policies and allied fields. It is also helpful to those who seek to comprehend the Indian culture through education.

The book begins with the 'necessities' and the needed directional changes in education in Bharat (p.17.). Also, he identifies the grey areas present in the educational machinery. He underlines the fact that lacunas of educational initiatives in the pre-colonial era have not been adequately rectified in post-colonial era in terms of developing the goals and objectives of education. He holds that 'education is the key towards positive changes in the country' (p.7). This proposition along with its varied facets is elaborated throughout this anthology.

The book consists of 41 essays broadly dealing with: unified nature of education; commercialisation of education; value and spiritualism—based learning; issues of autonomy; education for development; the proposed 2020 education policy; educational thoughts of notable scholars; the power of Hindi language; environmental challenges; synthesis of the ancient and the modern;

recasting curriculum; amongst others. The literature discloses the author's apprehension and thoughts concerning education, reinforcing the belief of the dictum— 'find out its solution, not only critique the problem'.

The narratives and frameworks of the text have been built upon the in-depth experimentation conducted in schools through the 'Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas'. The author emphasises the need to develop an education system for the country, consistent with its culture, disposition and progression, aiming towards the holistic development of students. The values impregnating every part of education is the central theme of this book. After critiquing the existing curriculum and pedagogy, he pleads for a curriculum, which maintains a balance between spiritualism and materialism and a pedagogy which employs experiential learning techniques. By deconstructing the chapters dealing with curriculum, it can be concluded that the author pleads for an alternative curriculum, entrenched in the past, capable of meeting the exigencies of the present, and keeps in its purview the prospects of the future. He calls for seriously revisiting the curriculum for helping address the existing discrepancies in terms of poor visualisation of the *Bharatiya* history, partisans, approach towards religions and vicious propaganda amongst others.

He holds the *Bharatiya* attitude to be highly proactive which believes in envisioning a future problem and devising ways and means to avert it from occurring. He states that certain practices like that of offering drinking water to birds, the practice of planting tree on birthdays, etc., are some of the practical means which propagates our cultural systems on the one hand and help mitigate environmental depletions on the other. The relevance of such experiences lies in the fact that if children receive these values and *samskaras* at an early age, they will spread them to their families and communities.

The book seeks to set and achieve the objectives of education, which according to the author have not yet been set by any policy. The author, through this book, provides a mechanism to forward his concerns regarding the need to develop an 'objective of education' consistent with the objectives of the nation. Some of the proposed objectives include fulfilling the needs of the society and the nation; having agency to resolve the challenges faced by the nation and society; promoting national integrity and unity and finally enriching the man's knowledge and sensitising for social and harmonious co-existence.

Another concern in this book is the sustainability of education. This sustainability is holistic, going beyond the conventional understanding of sustainability in terms of environment and economic

development. It underlines the flaws in the current education system that deters the development of the thinking process in individuals, thereby, acting as a hindrance to the holistic development of the personality as well as the society. The very general mentality seen in India is considering people speaking English language as scholars and those speaking one of the Indian languages as Arcadians—is the beginning of the growth of a narrow and unsustainable thought process (p.153).

The author's work is praiseworthy for two reasons, first for his recognition that the transformation of education can be carried out only if guided by the constitutional principles of decentralisation and equitability. Second, for providing a practice solution to the existing problems churned out from the *Bharatiya* traditions.

While the book gives newer insights into education, it suffers on certain points: first, it assumes that the sense of India (which is called 'Bharat' in the book), which guides the curriculum framers and policymakers of 1968 and 1986/92 policies is almost entirely linked to the colonial legacy. This may be true with respect to official edifices of the education machinery. But, unlike the British who believed in a trickling down approach and wanted to consolidate their rule, the Republic of India has aimed at universal elementary education to produce men and women of character and strength. Secondly, the tribals

and aboriginals of the nation face a plight that is significantly different from the mainstream. The author overlooks this section of society which is vital for a nation's growth. Thirdly, he advocates for an increase in the expansion of the *Bharatiya* native languages or mother tongues by advocating a three-language formula comprising mother tongue, official language and Sanskrit. He has shelved the importance of English by making it an 'optional' or 'choice' language. In this globalised world, the knowledge of English opens up newer avenues for exploration and interaction. Hence, rather than making English an 'optional' language, advocacy should be for better quality English learning. Fourthly, the author provides for only qualitative solutions while ignoring the need of quantitative contours of the progress, growth and problems concerning education. These qualitative aspects are generally linked to well-integrated verses from the *Vedic* literature and *Upanishads*, and confines the reader to think that the majority of '*Bharatiya* culture' comes only from these *Vedic* scriptures and *Upanishads*. While the effort is laudable to integrate the past with the present to develop a better

future, this balance created must be more diverse and inclusive in nature.

The incomplete task of the educational policies and committee recommendations, which include laying down the objectives of education and the framework of what an 'ideal education system' must be like, have been fulfilled by this book. Atul Kothari puts forward a practicable education system that could fulfil the needs of the society and nation, help in resolving national and international challenges, augment the nation's culture and ethos, and finally enrich the personality of humans and sensitise them for social co-existence. Thus, education must work for transformation and not regression.

The book covers a wide ground. It asks its readers to re-examine persistent questions of the composition of education and its purpose. At the same time, by engaging education in a broad historical, ideological and ethical context, it provokes the deliberations and discussion on educational practices currently prevailing in the country. The author through this book inspires its readers to visualise a system of education which is not a 'problem' but rather a 'solution'.

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