Education in India: Learning and Unlearning

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Abstract—: **This paper deals with the contemporary Indian education system, its theoretical base, pedagogy, curriculum and ground level realities. The paper also looks into limitations of main steam education and concludes with alternatives and beyond.**

Keywords—**Education, Pedagogy, Hierarchy, Social Inequality, Evaluation.**

I. EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

'Life is a self renewing process, renewal not of mere physical existence, but of entire experience of the group – of its beliefs, ideals, hopes, happiness miseries and practices. And education, is the means of this social continuity of life. It is a process of transmission/communication of the group heritage (Dewey 1966: 2).

The functionalist perspective on education and by far the most dominant perspective has pioneer Emile Durkheim suggesting that education contributes to social cohesiveness and moral order (1961 : 278). Similarly, Talcott Parsons saw education as a social system serving socialization and occupational roles (1968 : 200). Yehudi A. Cohen asserted that education is distinct from mere socialization, it is not just inculcation of basic motivational and cognitive patterns but inculcation of standardized and stereotyped knowledge skills, values and attitudes by means of standardized and stereotyped procedures (1971 : 22).

However, education deals with knowledge in a rather limited context, which is defined by the social reality of a particular time in history and locale. Education, thus according to Karl Manheim is not exactly true knowledge, but is what is perceived as knowledge in a given social milieu. Knowledge, rightly argues Manheim is reconstruction, based on selection made under given social circumstances (1962). In the name of retaining social order, education reproduces cohesiveness, however this cohesiveness could be viewed as cohesiveness of a kind, of promotion of existing inequality, divisiveness, inequality and asymmetrical power relations. Critical take on education suggests domination of hegemony of the dominant sections of society.

S. Bowles and H. Gintis (1976) argue that school education promote a 'technocratic – meritocratic ideological façade thus legitimizing economic inequality. It leads to reproduction of false consciousness. Likewise R. Miliband argues that schools reproduce and legitimize the existing capitalist society, its inequality and class divisions (Miliband 1972 : 239). L. Althusser saw education as part of ideological state apparatus, repressive in its own hegemonic way (Althusser : 1984) P. Bourdieu talked about fair degree of likeness between the culture of the educational institution and that of the dominant classes. Educational system has its own 'cultural arbitraries' that are variants of the arbitraries of the dominant class which then becomes 'cultural capital' of domination and divisiveness (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977 : 167). According to M. Apple, school education seek to create a technical and conformist mindset where a negative attitude is associated to the word 'conflict'. A consensus theory of scientific regularity is preached, criticality is denied (Apple 1979 : 83). M. Foucault's assertion of school education as new technique of discipline and institutionalization of imprisonment is central to the discussion here. The imagery of J. Bentham's 'panopticon' and centrality of a coercive, 'normalising gaze is especially poignant (Sheridan 1980 : 162).

According to J. Ellul, school education dominates the technological goals and aspirations of society and the chief goal of technology is not human emancipation but its own perpetuation and expansion. Children are educated so that they can precisely become 'things' in the way society wants them to be (Pathak 2002 : 50). For Ivan Illich, a radical educationist, his disillusionment with the school as a manipulative institution was total and therefore his call for 'deschooling society'. School is not a dependent variable but evolves a logic of its own which makes alienation prepatory to life (1972 : 2). Education, for P. Freire, through its system of 'banking education' reproduces the 'culture of silence', it is particularly not liberating for the oppressed. Education dehumanizes the oppressed and distances them from any emancipatory agenda (Freire 1972 : 21).

The Indian Story: It is in this context of Western industrial, capitalist, modern society and school education, that the debate on Indian education and schooling has to be located. Indian state and society is a curious repository of historical turns, of Hindu philosophy, spiritualism, Islamic doctrines and many other fragmentary knowledges. However, 200 years of British colonization and eventually decolonization and post-independent Indian state has an education system built upon more or less the model of western, scientific, technocratic modern, secular education. Form the colonial times, the idea of cognitive superiority of modern English education remained unchallenged. Charles Grant, James Mill, John Stuart Mill and then with the emergence of Thomas Babington Macaulay, supremacy of modern English education became unquestioned, it was gift of civilization to the 'Orientals' (Pathak 2002 : 91). The Wood's Despatch (1854) also asserted that nature of education in India should be improved through arts,

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literature and sciences of Europe and that Indian systems had major errors. After many reports, commissions, plans, expansion of university education, even the emergent middle class Indian envisioned education as English education.

Critique of colonial education came in the form of reassertion of orthodox Brahminical tradition and also through lower caste response. Apart from that, very productive voice of dissent came from M. Gandhi and R. Tagore. Gandhi resisted colonial education not because it came from the West but because there was inherent elitism and non connectivity with the rural subaltern mass. English education Gandhi felt, would make one a stranger in his/her own land and he/she would also be unable to appreciate the dignity of manual labour.

"The young man who emerges from this (English education) system can in no way compete in physical endurance with an ordinary labourer. The slightest physical exertion gives him a headache, a mild exposure to the sun is to cause him giddiness.… As for the faculties of the heart, they are simply allowed to run to seed or to grow anyhow in a wild undisciplined manner. The result is moral and spiritual anarchy (Gandhi 1951 : 11).

Gandhi did not hierarchise the different human faculties and sought to impart the whole education of the body, mind and soul through handicraft. He chose 'Takli' - a handicraft found universally in India, wanted people to understand the mechanics of 'Takli' construction which as well would restore dignity of manual labour, promote profit yielding vocation and make education relevant to the labouring class (Pathak 2002 : 104). Gandhi's basic education was craft as well as history, geography, science and arithmetic and mother tongue essentially was the advised medium for instruction.

Like Gandhi, R. Tagore wrote extensively on education and created his own educational project 'Santiniketan' – an alternative institutional educational agenda. Tagore was also against English as medium of instruction. Knowledge acquired through any foreign language for that matter would damage a child's creativity. No foreign language can become organic part of the learner's personality and there would always be the unbridgeable gap between the book and life. He was also in favour of the idea of 'Tapovan' – imparting education in scared space amidst the abundance of nature in which the child acquires from the charismatic guru his knowledge, wisdom and spirituality. Importance of ancient Hindu philosophical ideals of simplicity and austerity were focused on. An over emphasis on just books and written order according to Tagore was self negating thus destroying creativity. He wanted learners to draw resources from music, song, drama, dance, drawing apart from prescribed texts. Knowledge for him was boundary less and without fixed hierarchised source. He was not a revivalist or exclusivist but was critical of mechanical imitation of West (Pathak 2002 : 108).

Gandhi and Tagore were forgotten with the homecoming of Nehruvian modernist, nationalist project. To quote Poromesh Acharya :
Unfortunately, the educational discourse in India was changed in the wake of the Nehruvian modernization programme. Both Tagore and Gandhi lost their importance in the national discourse but were remembered more by street and 'bhavan' names. In every city we have streets in the name of Gandhi and a 'Rabindra Bhaban'. The national system of education, however, still remains the legacy of the colonial system, turning more and more segregative and bookish (Acharya 1997 : 601).

The Nehruvian nationalist agenda of education was a break as well as continuity with the colonial world view. There was continuity in the celebration of 'scientific temper' of science, rationality and knowledge system of the West, social transformation on the lines of industrialization, secularization and material well being. The break with the colonial hangover was in the importance which Nehru also puts on the cultural tradition and heritage of India (Nehru 1983 : 509-12).

It is this agenda that shapes independent India's educational policy as several reports of several educational policy of the Government suggests. The basic philosophical agenda for education policy was : science as supreme knowledge, unity as a nationalist project, equality as a secular aspiration, cultural sensitivity as an ideal (Pathak 2002 : 112-116). 'What do we know' and 'how do we know' are questions of epistemology to which are associated the two main foundationalist schools, the empiricists and the rationalists trying to secure knowledge on the basis of sense experience and reason, respectively. While both these schools value the scientific view of the world and provide evidence to matter and its existence, there can be greater epistemological concerns over and above 'knowing about knowing' and moving towards 'knowing about being and doing'. Such concerns are not strictly epistemological but also metaphysical and aesthetic. The pedagogy of education and the curriculum of education ideally should be informed by all epistemological concerns and at this point it is relevant for us to bring under scanner the post independent India's educational concerns, curriculum and pedagogical strategies, skills and crafts. Critical pedagogy helps us to look into the relationship between knowledge, authority and power.

II. KNOWLEDGE, CURRICULUM & PEDAGOGY

Knowledge in society and knowledge about society is essentially administered through school education, through curriculum and syllabus formulation and other pedagogical exercises of evaluation, through examination etc. This whole process in India, according to Krishna Kumar has never been an act of social deliberation and dialogue. In a society like India, where material capital and cultural capital are so unequally distributed, education has always been a matter of social engineering. Curriculum designing in the school is in charge of a educational bureaucracy which

includes the quasi- bureaucracy of the state controlled institutions of a particular type of pedagogical research and training. It has never been treated as an act of deliberation. Knowledge has been structured in a way where the agencies of the learners as well as the teachers do not find any voice. Knowledge is constructed, convoluted and suppressed. Curriculum has a veil of 'national' concerns which are linked with economically and culturally dominant groups.

Texts as total ideologies: India is a country with great diversity. There are 29 states, 7 union territories, 23 officially recognized languages with sub dialects, diverse religious, ethnic and caste groups and subgroups. But the history of India that goes in the curriculum of education is a uniform, centralized one. National Policy of Education has NCERT standard texts, centralized examination system. The social construction of India is on the lines of secular nationalism which avoids glorification of a Hindu past but nevertheless talks of a tolerant Hindu civilization, the Muslim outsider becoming an insider, the tyranny of the British colonialism. Colonialism is portrayed as exploitative; communalism, a colonial technique of rule is seen as divisive; and nationalism, the one and only Congress nationalism is seen as progressive, unifying. The State is seen as an agent of development and the model of development is emancipatory in nature, techno-economic, industrial modern, on the capitalist-consumerist line.

The NCERT texts support the ideology of the modern nation state but in the process hierarchises a particular form of knowledge and politics, valorizes enlightened urban upper caste/upper middle class people as agencies and marginalizes/alienates voices of all forms of minorities subalternity, multiplicity, relativism.

English as 'The' medium: The existing schooling pattern perpetuates social inequality because schools are not uniform, there are Government sponsored most schools and private elite schools. The discourse over whether medium of instruction should be 'English' is not merely a pedagogical question over technique of learning. The debate is vernacular vs English debate where there is a digital divide between the vernacular equipped mass and English trained elite. The divide transcends language gets entangled with the question of superiority, exclusive elite club identity, status, domination, privilege. Those trained in the vernacular lack self-confidence and those trained English are over confident, over indulgent, callously and unashamedly ignorant about the vernacular. Such a language divide further alienates and separates people into camps of haves and have-nots and market economy thrives as well as reinforces such divides.

Science Education Glorified: Indian education system consciously as well as unconsciously divided and hierarchised subjects into hard and soft, reading 'science' as hard and 'humanities' as soft. Science requires intelligence, hard work, merit and humanities and literatures are for the mediocre people. This myth is internalized and socialization on the basis of this happens within as well as outside schools. Such an understanding is common knowledge, an understanding which is a major cognitive barrier in the unity of knowledge. Moreover, the 'science' which is kept over

and above humanities is also a kind of perceived which is instrumental, applied, technocratic in nature rather than pure, theoretical science. The authentic spirit of both science and humanities are at stake, the prevalent pedagogy is about reductionist, lucrative, market-friendly, techno-repetitive 'knowledge' manufacture.

Examination as evaluation: Reflecting the spirit of reductionist pedagogy and a value loaded conceptualization of meritocracy, mechanisms of evaluation are designed. 'What has a child learned?' Knowledge has become a measurable commodity where one's knowledge is measured in comparison to someone else's knowledge. Examinations are central to the evaluation mode in education. It is commonly argued that schooling is not just about knowledge, teaching, learning and sharing; it is also about objective evaluation. This qualification of cognitive is done through examinations – centralized, impersonal, uniform, time and space bound. Rote learning and mechanical reading becomes important where a child endlessly rehearse for the reproduction of a set-type of desirable number of answers. These answers are predictable, unimaginative, uncritical and grossly scripted. The test of knowledge is limited to a one time, hit and miss, custom made, mechanical examination. Individual qualitative experiences, biographies, unique knowledge comprehension, differential conceptualization of problematic, self-evaluation, dialogue and practical, progressive, continuous evaluation – are ideas and issues alien to centralized hegemony of examinations.

'Will I be promoted to the next class?' The concern that naturally succeeds post examination is the result. Whether a child gets promoted to the next level of knowledge gaining mechanism and how unsuccessfully he/she moves to that level brings us to the questions of marks, grades, points, degrees, certificates and more. Examinations and quantifiable results are divisive and hierarchical and essentially leads to a digital divide and performance – success anxiety. This anxiety takes as its victims not only the children but also parents, near kins and extended families and peers. Results become grounds of contestation as well as exhibitionism. Result and degrees become end in itself and hierarchised evaluation and schooled consciousness celebrates a kind of success and portrays failure as lack of merit intelligence, talent, hard work etc. (Pathak 2002 : 181). Meritocracy as a model works best among population with equal life chances to begin with. The fact that merit, intelligence, talent etc. are socially constructed and that deeper enquiry into social structures of inequality are to be made- is something which is deliberately forgotten. Real contradictions get hidden, inequality gets legitimized and rationalized.

III. CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY: CAUGHT BETWEEN 'MISPLACED BINARIES' AND 'ONES'

Post 1990s, India's primary education has received much attention in the context of structural adjustment of the economy to the world capitalist system. International aid, funding as well as governmental programmes have given education in India a renewed life. 'Sarva Siksha Abhiyan',

Education Guarantee Scheme, District Primary Education Programme, Operation Blackboard and Mid day Meal Programme are a few significant and visionary policy programmes initiated by the government. The single point agenda is universal access to education of comparable quality for all children. However, the difference between vision, mission and ground reality remains – the fourth All India Educational Survey showed that 50% of primary schools in India do not have a concrete building, play ground or even drinking water facility, 40% are without black boards, 70% without any form of library and the 'drop-out' rate for the youngest age group is nearly 61% (Kumar 1992 : 60).

What went wrong? The easiest answer to this question is that there is no single answer and there are a multitude of factors worth critical reflection in understanding the dismal condition of primary education in India. I would like to substantiate the case with the help of analyzing misplaced 'binaries' and over emphasized 'ones'. In India between quantity and quality, in so far as primary education is concerned, more stress has been given on the quantitative expansion in terms of statistical data. Literacy figures are more important than quality education and a clear divide exists between knowledge and degree with mediocre majority equating the two and often glorifying degree accumulation. Beyond these binaries, distinctions are made between Science and Arts, hard science and soft science, theoretical and vocational education, English language and vernacular. Science, hard science, theoretical education and English language – on one side of the binary are the desirable superior and looked upon by the aspirants of society – parents, relatives, teachers, peer group and students alike. Yet another set of misplaced binary is between a few elite private schools and many government schools for the masses. This private – public divide further divides society into haves and have nots and the Indian education system inspite of its philosophical commitment to 'equal education for all', continues with its hierarchical structure.

Inspite of pictures, programmes, funding, innovative scheme, one major handicap facing the universal education mission is the very high 'drop-out rate' of students from schools at various levels. This brings us to the pedagogically dangerous misplace between work and play. Fixed class hours, time-table, syllabus, suggestive question-answers examination, pass-fail – all reduce education into hard work. It ceases to be a joyful learning process, knowledge instead of being liberating becomes oppressive and moreover the child also alienated from his immediate natural, physical and social surrounding. There is no agency of the learner, no dialogical involvement, no practical cognitive initiative. Studies fail to graduate itself from work to play, from a boring, mechanical activity to fun, creativity, happiness.

Both work and play are important components of life and the division in itself is shallow. If work becomes half as interesting as play, joy of working increases manifold leading to productivity, development and progress. This simple truth has been missed out by educational policy framers and education has become a serious, centralized business in India and echoing Adorno, we can also talk about an absolute 'Education Industry' much in the lines of culture industry. This education industry is the supreme 'one' that has created lot of damage and requires reflexive introspection. In the plea of universal education, Indian education has a model of uniform education with centralized curriculum, centralized examination boards, exam dates, exam modes, degrees. India is a nation with one sovereignty, political boundary, constitution, law and democracy. But India is also a nation of many nationalities real as well as imagined with regional, ethnic, cultural, religious, lingual and physical divergences. This fragmented India, this plurality of voices do not go in the making of Indian education. It is a type of India that is represented through this education industry. Degrees are obtained by millions of students through rote learning, made easy notes, private tuition rackets etc. Whatever little they learn in this process however is the prepackaged education industry recipe. After accumulation of a fair number of degrees, many also get jobs but education remains a means and learners as mere passive patients of 'mental coma'. There capacity to think, problematise, take initiative and relate to the world and environment around gets blunted. Marcuse's One-dimensional Man never leaves us, worst, the victims are not even self-aware of their existential crisis. Pedagogical and epistemological crisis leads to ontological crisis – false consciousness, alienation, unhappiness.

IV. CONCLUSION: ALTERNATIVES & BEYOND

Thinking in terms of alternative education started in India as early as the 1900s with Rabindra Nath Tagore's vision and the establishment of Patha Bhavan and Viswa Bharati in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. We have talked about his vision in brief in section A. To the present day there are a few endeavours to name, which challenge the conventional educational model. Sri Aurobindo Centre for Education formed with the ideas of saint-philosopher Aurobindo and his disciple Mira Alfasa (better known as Mother) harp on the idea of free progress education. Schools under Aurobindo Centre like Mirambika in New Delhi, visions education as dedication, meditation, intellectual as well as physical, moral and psychic unity. J. Krishnamurti's Alternative education and home schooling model has schools like The Peepal Grove School, Rishi Valley Education Centre. One of the pioneers in alternative education today is Saugata Mitra, whose ideas like "Hole in the Wall' and Schools in the cloud' are about minimally invasive education. The method that Mitra talks about is Self Organized Learning Environment (SOLE). However, alternative educational models are far and few in between. And a major methodological problem with such conceptualization is that it creates another problematic binary between mainstream and alternative and while such alternative cannot accommodate many, it remains exclusive thus creating another hierarchy and limited membership group. The need of the hour is to think beyond binaries and organically bring in elements of the alternative within the existing mode of education. The self has to be the learner and the teacher has to be the facilitator and the resulting interaction dialogical. Curriculum has to be scientific in the Mertonian sense of institutional imperatives – universalism

(transcending barriers), communism (transparent, democratic, public knowledge), disinterestedness (science for science sake), organized skepticism (question everything, spare nothing) (Merton , 1972). This would also call for Popperian falsification and refutability. Scientificity is thus about the open spirit and not about arts, humanities, commerce, soft science, hard science and the list continues. History should be seen as 'many' – it should take into account the central/official history which might be remote for a student, and it should also take into account local distant histories which might be near to a student. Language, literature , mathematics and all other subject should be beyond text books. They should be lived experience of aesthetic, sensibility, cognition, exploration of self and others. Evaluation should be more at the level of self-competitiveness rather than competition with others. Education should be beyond instrumentality and utilitarianism but essentially mainstream. We need to detoxify school education and not de-school society

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