

## RETHINKING INTEGRAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

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*The nation or society, like the individual, has a body, an organic life, a moral and aesthetic temperament, a developing mind and soul behind all these signs and power for the sake of which they exist.... in the same way (as the individual) the primal law and purpose of a society, community or nation is to seek its own fulfillment. It strives hard rightly to find itself, to become aware within itself of the law and power of its own being and to fulfill it as perfectly as possible, to realize all its potentialities to live its own self-revealing life.*

**- Sri Aurobindo**

The above cited words of Sri Aurobindo underscore the significance of 'chiti' i.e. the soul of a nation and intense character without mentioning the word. 'Chiti' has its roots in Indian psyche, philosophy and culture. As the all permeating element lying underneath varied forms, it can be traced to the Vedic, Upanishdic and puranic texts. The *Markandeya Purana* states it explicitly, "*Chitirupen ya kratsnamekam vyapta sthita.*" Here, *chiti* emerges as power or energy that governs and conditions the movement of entire universe. It is the *shakti* i.e. energy or power that the Indian mind kept in mind while structuring and organizing life and society. Since education is the means of realizing the full potentialities of individual and society which is possible only by structuring education according to the *swabhava* of the nation, it is imperative to re-

think about Indian education. Education system not based on Indian *swabhava*— individual and natural — would lead to distortion of the psyche and victimization of its learners. Lord Krishna stressed on it in the *Gita*, "*Karyate hyavashah karma sarvah prakrityaigunaih*". (*Bhagavad-Gita*: 3.5) "*Sadrasham cheshatate swasyah prekratergyanvanpi*". 3.33) Since all are made to work under compulsion by the *gunas* (qualities) born of nature, even a man of wisdom behaves according to his own nature. True education manifests, sustains and supports true attributes of nature and facilitates realization of inherent potentialities. Education system, contrary to it, kills the true being and character of the societies that should welcome the best thoughts from the world without being thrown off the feet. Even at the cost of inviting the ire of commentators and scholars of the *Gita*, I would

take the limited meaning of the term *dharma* as natural qualities, as in case of *jal dharma* which means that the true nature or character of water i.e. is to provide soothing cool effect. If heated, water loses its natural character and leaves scorching or burning effect. In this context, the words of Krishna teach us more about education system, when he says, “*Swadharme nidhandm shreyah pardharmo bhayavahah.*” (3:35) Death is better while being engaged in action in consonance with one’s own nature. Following the *dharma* of someone else is fraught with danger. In the similar manner, it is equally dangerous to follow alien *shiksha-dharma* (education model) which glosses over indigenous cultural experience and transmission of knowledge through institutionalization of various modalities developed for preservation, acquisition, creation, dissemination and application. However, I must sound a caveat here that even during the colonial period there were many freedom fighters, political leaders and intellectuals like Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo and Dr B R Ambedkar who were products of colonial education system. One of the reasons for this is that they were in/formed by the other minor European tradition based on universal human and spiritual values. This, for instance, may be seen in the list of European books mentioned at the end of Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*.

The present education system attracts censure of all, even those who are its products. At the ideological level, it does not enthrall either capitalists, for it does not provide suitable workforce for their business establishments, or socialists, for it does not ensure equal opportunities for education or employment to all, or even nationalists, for alien model imposed in the colonial period is against the basic ethos of

the nation. It ironically continues to drag its body and tail along even after six decades of India’s independence, though it cannot be denied that there were a few islands of excellence and individuals who led the Indian’s struggle for independence. This was one of the greatest ironies of colonialism but most of them sustained themselves because of their cultural and familiar ethos. In addition to it, they were shaped by the other European tradition, as it was in case of Mahatma Gandhi who read Leo Tolstoy, Mazzini and Americans like Henry Thoreau and R W Emerson among others.

Even after six decades, we did not learn either from our own experience or American. For instance, America attained its independence in 1776 but it was Emerson who exhorted his countrypersons to choose between the American and the European models. Though the Americans were descendents of Europeans yet he insisted on American model, and the result was “American Scholar” in 1838 that gave a new purpose and direction to American literature, culture and society.

In order to revamp Indian education system that would aim at producing Indian scholar whose ideal would be intellectual warrior combining intellectual and physical robustness or spiritual nationalist, it is necessary to change the existing system. For this we will have to decide if we wish to tinker with the system or transform it or do we wish to demolish the load bearing structure of the system and begin afresh?

Quite a few soul leaders and thinkers have provided their models of education. Rabindranath Tagore did it in the form of Vishwabharti and Shantiniketan, Mahamana Madan Mohan Malviya in the form of Benaras Hindu University, Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry, Mahatma Gandhi in the form of

*Buniyadi Talim* and Nanaji Deshmukh did so at Chitrakoot. All of them had varied measure of success or failure for different reasons but could not make revolutionary impact, for the rulers did not allow them to be in the mainstream education system. The lack of political will on the part of people in power and of academic will on the part of teaching community frustrated even a distant chance of Indian education system in spirit. And we are left with no other option but to think of restructuring the existing education. Let me concede the fact that the restructuring would not include dismantling much of organizational structure but change it keeping the *chiti* or vital energy of the nation in view. Such a model of Indian education system would hinge on four principal pillars:

I. The main objective of Indian education is knowledge with the end of *mukti* (emancipation) and attainment of four goals of life (*purushartha chatustaya*) i.e. *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. They are not metaphysical but physical concepts, as the first stands for righteous conduct, the second for economic well-being attained through righteous conduct, the third for gratification of desires in the light of *dharma* and *artha* and the *moksha* is emancipation from the cause of pain. Each one of them, if taken out of context and proportion, can be perverted, as *dharma* can become ritualism, *artha* greed, *kama* lust and *moksha* escapism. Also, if one goes directly to the last by ignoring the first three, it can be fraught with spiritual disasters. The ultimate purpose of education is to make Indian scholar an intellectual warrior, a nationalist spiritualist. Here let me add the notion of *rashtra* does not conflict with other, for it is based on inclusive assumption that happy

nationalism will lead to happy internationalism.

II. The Gurukul model is most suitable to reshape Indian education for children. Let me mention it here that the Gurukul of yore need not be revived, as it existed in the past. Even the *rishi*, if they were to establish their gurukul today would have modified and implemented accordingly. The spirit of Gurukul, which is more important than all else, needs to be understood and implemented. In that case, it becomes a metaphor or trope for autonomous responsive and responsible, non-commodified, non-discriminatory education in which teacher would play the role of mother, father and teacher in one. Teacher's concern and commitment for shaping future generation by embracing the path of voluntary poverty would enable him/her to transcend constrain of different sorts. The most important thing is to restore the feeling of family (*kul*) to education system. The remains of this respect for teacher can still be seen in our villages where parents while handing over child to the teacher from the first day of admission would say, "I hand over the child to you. Flesh of the child is yours and bones are mine." It might appear obnoxious to some but the fact is that it showed complete trust in teacher. Whatever the learner-centric educationist might say, true education is teacher-centric and a good and committed teacher is indispensable and irreplaceable. After the Gurukul model, the Nalanda model can be used for restructuring education system in general and higher education in particular. To some, it might appear a revivalist or retrogressive step. It is relevant and achievable even today if we

subscribe to its spirit and implement it with full commitment ruthlessly. In order to do so, it demands the best available minds as faculty members in the given domain of knowledge with the ratio of 2:10 i.e. one teacher for 5 students, the library facilities of international standards, no state intervention in its management after ensuring adequate financial support in the form of donation or revenue villages, restricted admission of students on the basis of merit of admission test (Only 20 to 30 percent could get admission in it.), and above all the subjects taught covered every field of learning/knowledge (conventional, professional and vocational). The library of the university, founded by Kumaragupta, named Dharmagunj (Mountain of Truth) or Dharmaganga (Treasury of Truth) had three buildings, nine storeys each, named as Ratnasagar (Sea of Jewels), Ratnodadhi (Ocean of Jewels) and Ratnaranjaka (Delighter of Jewels). After being sacked by Bakhtiar Khilji in 1193, the burning of the library continued for several months and, as Gertrude Emerson noted, the “smoke from the burning books hung for days like a dark pall over the low hills.”

**III.** If the society, ruling political and bureaucratic classes are willing to invest in it and eschew the temptation of their intervention, Nalanda can be a reality and put us among the best in the world. However, it has to be admitted that the Nalanda model can be suitable for Indian higher education which should have excellence as the main criterion and none else. The Nalanda University is a matter of our national heritage and is a metaphor of excellence in higher education. Even at the

risk of courting the displeasure of diehard acolytes of democracy, I would state it here that democracy and excellence in higher education are not compatible.

**IV.** The ultimate end of education is to help human beings become integrated personalities i.e. not just lopsided but all-round personalities. All these terms are often heard common places. But just knowledge without human values reduces human beings to the level of animals. It adds another dimension to the function of education as education of character. However, there is much clamor for terms like character building, integral education, and value oriented education in our present system that they cease to have any meaning. Let me in such a situation discuss the main elements of integral education by keeping the fact in view that the present education system is either devoid of them or does not have space for some or most of them.

Character is a habit long continued. It, however, leaves much unsaid, for by character what is often meant is a good character. A bad habit long continued makes one a bad character. If a person tells lies and becomes a habitual liar, he would be put in the category of a liar. It presupposes that a person inherits a few traits or dispositions from parents. It is here that *samakara*-s come in the play. However, training or education can help in burning the gross in a pupil, and building character on the basis of value oriented education is an integral aspect of education. Character will be built in any case, but good character building by which an individual can realize his full potential and can contribute meaningfully for the

development of his self and society is the main objective of education.

Character is a matter of individuality and defines the nature of the individual's link with the society. Moreover, character is not a static but dynamic concept in Indian context. It is related to *char* that means to move ahead, and also to *achara* which can be loosely approximated as behavior. For this, the system of education needs to cater to the following seven aspects:

- i. **Physical Well being:** Physical well being is the foundation of education. Human life can neither be lived nor its objectives be achieved fully without good health. *Sharirmadhyam khalu dharmasadhanam*. Good health is the foundation of good life. Education should ensure it by incorporating games and sports as vital components of education so that students are physically fit, internationally competitive sportspersons, and able to defend themselves. In this sense the Nalanda model needs some modification in this respect, for it, despite being a centre of learning failed to defend itself against its desecrators.
- ii. **Emotional Well-being:** Education needs to cater to emotional well being and maturity of its pupils. Without emotional gratification, human beings would become a machine. By nature human beings are emotional being first and rational thereafter. Education must ensure balance between emotional and rational faculties.
- iii. **Intellectual or Rational Well-being:** Education should ensure development of rational faculty and cultivation of scientific temper by learners can distinguish between information and knowledge, and between true knowledge and false knowledge, and between knowledge and wisdom without

making learners dustbin of information. In fact, the so called knowledge society that has witnessed explosion of information due to unprecedented advancement in computational abilities and technology is nothing but information society. The end of education is not information but knowledge and wisdom. T S Eliot had summed it up for all of us when he remarked that life is lost in living, wisdom is lost in knowledge and knowledge is lost in information. In fact the destination of information is knowledge which should ultimately reach wisdom. Education must guard its wards against subjective use of emotional and rational faculties, as can be seen at present when we look at our personal problems emotionally and others' rationally.

Apart from the distinction among information, knowledge and wisdom the students should learn to know knowledge, difference between knowledge and truth, and between *rta* (truth as value) and *satya* (truth as fact).

- iv. **Aesthetic Well-being:** It is concerned with learners' ability to appreciate whatever is 'beautiful' in different manifestations and forms, harmony and rhythms of nature—living and non-living. S/he i.e., the learner should not be 'a mere mechanical being' but should evolve as a being who can 'stand and stare' at recurrence of harmony in different in the creations of nature and wo/man. At the level of educational transactions there should be adequate focus on fine arts and humanities. In addition, it should enable the learners to see and appreciate beauty in ugliness and life in lifelessness or death. At the advanced level s/he should be able to understand and discuss the concept of beautiful in different cultures and



civilization, particularly Indian and western. It is worth mentioning here that aesthetics would lead to ethics, for in consonance with the Greek concept of '*kalekgothia*' what is beautiful has to be good, and what is good becomes beautiful in the course of time. In this sense, this attribute 'aesthetic well-being' would lead to 'moral well-being' in education which is discussed later in VI.

- v. **Relational Well-being:** Relational well being is concerned with ability to understand, appreciate, respect and live complex web of relations that an individual is born with as in individual, a son/daughter, brother/sister, father/mother, pupil/teacher, husband/wife or as a member of community, society or world. This is to be graded but it should be in terms of the concept of *rna*, as discussed in the *Mahabharata*. Literally *rna* means debt but it is not financial debt repayable in monetary terms but is a set of duties emanating from the concept of ethical debt repayable through performance of duties. They include "*devarna* (debt to nature), *pitrrna* (to the parents and forefathers), *rsirna* (to the great teachers in the tradition one is born into), *nrrna* (to the humanity at large), and *bhutarna* (to all living beings)". (*Manusamhita* 3. 70-71, *Satpatha Brahmana* 1. 7. 2. 1, *Ramayana* 2. 4. 14, *Mahabharata* 12. 7. 17-18, 12, 63. 20, 12. 65. 19 & 21) These are innate debts, and their awareness and the capacity to resolve them emerge gradually in life and should be made a part of the education system.
- vi. **Moral Well-being:** Education must include full awareness of restrain over impulses or desires and pursuit of the path of duties towards all in the society in such a way that it becomes an intrinsic part of a learner's personality. This is in consonance with the

natural Indian concern with duties and willingness to suffer for them. This duty-centric nature of Indian society makes human rights an alien imposition. In the west it is taken care by the discipline of ethics and in India by the over-arching notion of *dharma* and the discipline of *dharmashastra-s*.

- vii. **Spiritual Well-being:** Spirituality is not a metaphysical category to me. As a physical category or state it comes into existence, when an individual leading his/her life by following hard yet edifying moral path begins to think about other than one's own self in relation to the ultimate and realizes that one and the same spirit pervades in all, though the forms might be different. This is the ultimate knowledge and realization. The journey is from differentiating intellect (*bhedbuddhi*) to non-differentiating intellect (*abhedbuddhi*) that ensures establishment of the principles of truth, beauty and love. These seven constitutive elements of education, discussed above, are like seven colors of rainbow of the integrated personality of Indian scholar. They should be reflected in the syllabi and inculcated in the early stages of education i.e. pre-primary or primary education, the stages when *tabula rasa* of young minds is imprinted with indelible impressions and observations. Let me sound a caveat here that mere syllabus having the above-mentioned components will not serve the purpose of character building. Good teacher matters the most in education. But what kind of teacher? A teacher who has accepted teaching as the path of voluntary poverty for forming generations for future is irreplaceable, though it seems difficult to think of such teachers in an age in which

everything including education has been commodified, and a teacher has to support and sustain his family in the society. The fact however remains that a child learns more by observing his/her teacher than through syllabi or management. A teacher who feels for his/her students can transcend all limitations of syllabi, infrastructure, management or ambience. A teacher with vision would find provision for achieving his/her objectives. Good responsible syllabi would facilitate the process. Good teachers are foundation of education. However good a model or autonomy may be, it would yield result only if there are committed teachers to implement. Those who chose to be teachers because they failed to be police constables cannot serve the purpose of education, however good their training and syllabi might be. Here let me add that learners today are less insulated than they were a few decades ago. Technology enabled fast means of communication and transport have made local vulnerable to global influences. New students are different from their counterparts and so are their requirements and aspirations. They do not want to be insulated from the rest of the world, and so deeper and invisible is the penetration of technology that they cannot be insulated. The overall vision of education needs to take cognizance of all changes that are taking place but without ignoring the essential character of the nation that takes note of global but preserves local. The new education system has not to be 'glocal' (global+local) but 'lobal' i.e. 'local' first and 'global' later. The message for the new system is: Read students and feed them accordingly.

The examination system demands greater attention, as it is against the value education. The system privileges high scoring students. To be a topper or a position holder, a student has to indulge in the cut-throat competition. S/he would not share his/her notes in order to top the class. How absurd would be talk of value education and character building based on the cosmopolitanism and '*vishwabandhutwa*', if students of a class cannot be friends or brothers! In order to make students less individualistic and learn to live with others as brothers and sisters of a family, it is possible to divide the class in small units of 7 or 8 students of different levels, and the performance of the team/group, and not individuals, would be the criterion to judge students. One might say that the model proposes to replace the individual performance with a larger group. With respect for the skepticism, I must state that this alternative is a better choice, for it at least tones down the impact of the virus of individualism and learn the knowledge managerial skills for one's own self and for the group as well, as the best in the group would strive to lift the others and learn and run together.

The above discussion pertaining to integral education is imperative in view of the fact that the present century is touted to be the knowledge century, and also that it belongs to India. The question that demands being asked here is: So what even if India becomes a knowledge society? America is a knowledge society and all is not well with it. Do we wish to be a clone of American society? There is a world beyond the knowledge society i.e., the value-based society that lives wisely, for which it is necessary to have character building value-oriented integral education. Ultimately, what is the value of education, if it is not value-oriented education?

The future of India depends on the education based on value-oriented education based on natural and cultural ethos and dispositions or *chiti*. Failure to do so would amount to educational suicide, for no nation in human history has ever progressed by ignoring its *swabhava* or cultural ethos. We can begin with the integration of our cultural ethos into the existing system in our way. However, the cruel reality stares at us and tells us that vested interests abhor changes that would disturb status quo. To do so, perhaps we will have to think of not reforming but re-forming education after demolishing it.

**PS:** *The paper is based on interactions and insights from various scholars, particularly Dr Kiritbhai Joshi during his stay in Gandhinagar in 2009 and 2010 in particular.*

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