



Swami Vivekananda and His Thoughts about Education

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ABSTRACT

“Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.” (IV. 358)

The great spiritual luminary, thinker and patriot-prophet of our times is none other but Swami Vivekananda. He had many deep and insightful ideas on education. A number of thoughtful people are influenced by his far-reaching vision of education. Recognizing this contribution of his, UNESCO has identified Swami Vivekananda as one of the eminent educationists of the world.

Recognizing the contributions of Vivekananda, let me point out a few things.

First Swami Vivekananda's commitment to universalism and tolerance is active identification with humanity as a whole. Second, he showed remarkable concern for the poor and the destitute people. Thirdly, Swamiji's preoccupation with human development and his vision of education, science and culture are the essential instruments for such development. He recognizes the variety of the human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of the common heritage.' Now we shall dwell upon Swamiji's ideas of real education. Swami Vivekananda said:

‘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.’ [C.W. III. 302]

Here are five of his ideas -



- 1) His definition of education and his concern about the need to strengthen spiritual and secular values in education;
- 2) His appeal for spreading moral and ethical education;
- 3) His ideas of women education;
- 4) His call for education of the masses;
- 5) His idea about the need for an interface between science and religion in the present-day world.

Swamiji's statements and messages are relevant even today. Frankly speaking, his ideas are even more necessary today to be practiced and realized than they were during his time—not only by Indians but by the people of the whole world.

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The Ramkrishna Mission was founded in May 1897. The objectives of the Ramkrishna Mission are:

- (a) To impart and support the study of the Vedanta and its principles as propounded by Sri Ramakrishna and practically illustrated by his own life, and of comparative theology in its widest form.
- (b) To impart and promote the study of the arts, sciences, and industries.
- (c) To prepare teachers in all branches of knowledge above-mentioned and facilitate them to reach the masses.
- (d) To carry on educational work among the masses.



(e) To establish, maintain, carry on, and assist schools, colleges, orphanages, workshops, laboratories, hospitals, dispensaries, houses for the infirm, the invalid and afflicted, famine relief works, and other educational and charitable works, and institutions of a like nature.

(f) To print and publish and to sell or distribute gratuitously or otherwise, journals, periodicals, books or leaflets, that the Association may think desirable for the promotion of its objects.

(g) To incorporate any institutions, societies, or associations having objects wholly or in part similar to any of those of the Association, and to co-operate with any person or persons in aid of such objects.

Recognizing the contributions of Vivekananda, let me point out a few things.

First Swami Vivekananda's commitment to universalism and tolerance is active identification with humanity as a whole. Second, he showed remarkable concern for the poor and the destitute people. The Mission he established in India and which has now spread all over the world is working to reduce poverty and eliminate discrimination among the different segments of the society. There is no greater challenge we face today than this. Thirdly, Swamiji's preoccupation with human development and his vision of education, science and culture are the essential instruments for such development. He places the human being at the centre of his efforts in his development. He places tolerance at the top of his agenda for building peace and democracy. He recognizes the variety of the human cultures and societies as an essential aspect of the common heritage.'

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Spiritual and Secular values in Education:

Swamiji defined education as ‘. . .the manifestation of the perfection already in man.’ [C.W. IV. 358] What a man learns is really what he discovers by taking the cover off his own soul which is the mine of infinite knowledge, he asserts. Indeed, the origin of the idea lies in the philosophy of Vedanta which asserts that knowledge is inherent in human being like spark in a piece of flint. All that is needed is the strike of a suggestion to bring it out.

Let us interpret this particular sentence which we hear too often and also read about— ‘Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.’ According to him, *manifestation* indicates a spontaneous growth provided that the impediments are removed. He explains the term ‘perfection’ as the goal of actualizing the highest human potential. However, the goal varies from society to society and, in the context of the vast Indian civilization, perfection may be viewed from two levels.

First is the metaphysical level where perfection means the realization of the soul’s own ever-perfect nature. Second is the empirical level. There, according to Vivekananda himself, perfection means achieving the stage where one stands on one’s legs, well-equipped to win the struggles of life with a spirit of philanthropy and the courage of a lion.

‘Perfection’ in the definition of education is the human beings’ potential. It has three aspects.



- 1) Capacity – the acquisition of a specific characteristic or competence that makes learning possible.
- 2) Propensity – of doing something when the opportunity comes – implying the development of learning.
- 3) Capability – the competence of working towards an intended outcome with the strength of getting rid of obstacles to learning. It implies self-development or self-empowerment.

Therefore, in the spiritual sense, education is the process of discovering the capacity, propensity and capability of a human being to realize his/her own soul's ever-perfect nature.

In the secular sense, education is the process of bringing out in a human being the capacity, the propensity and the capability of self-development and self-empowerment in order to be self-reliant with a spirit of philanthropy and courage. One may note here the continuity of secular and spiritual values in Vivekananda's definition of education. We shall see how the secular values have also been emphasized by Swamiji, and how spirituality and secularism have been integrated in his thoughts, ideas and actions.

The end of all education – 'Man making':

In respect of the secular values, Swamiji continues: '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'. [C.W. III. 302] Then he goes on to say: 'The training by which the current and expression of will are brought under control and become fruitful is called education.' [C.W. IV. 490] So, according to him, the end of all education, all training should be man-making. Education should let human beings grow. What the country wants for that, he says, are 'muscles of iron and nerves of steel'. First of all, our young men and women must be strong. Religion will come afterwards. This is the special characteristic of Vivekananda. Though a monk, he always stressed that the world is not to be ignored. Why? For our own benefit, as well as for the benefit of the world as a whole. He said: Be strong, my young friends. That is my advice to you. Indeed, the



ultimate goal of the whole process of education is to unravel the truth of inherent perfection—perfection already existing in man. For that we have to combine knowledge with compassion, efficiency and moral excellence. This brings us to the next idea that I try to assimilate—the issue of moral and ethical education.

The innermost core of education – Religion:

Explaining the essence of religion, Swami Vivekananda said, ‘Religion is not in books, nor in theories, nor in dogmas, nor in talking, not even in reasoning. It is being and becoming.’ [C.W., III. p. 253] It is realization. It is the innermost core of education, manifesting the divinity already

in man, as Swamiji said. That is why he proclaimed in the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on 11 September 1893:

Sectarianism, bigotry, and the horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. . . . But their time is come; and I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honour of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.

Vivekananda therefore reminds us that the noblest words of peace that the world has ever heard have come from men on the religious plane, and the bitterest denunciation that the world has ever known has been uttered by religious men. The world today is passing through this crisis. There is a great necessity therefore to stress the importance that the Swami gave to education for the cultivation of peace, a spirit of acceptance and inclusiveness.



Swamiji delineates the third aspect of moral and ethical education with the following words: 'Help and not Fight', 'Assimilation and not Destruction', 'Harmony and Peace and not Dissension'. Again, 'each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.'

Education of women

Women in India were far behind men in the field of education when Swamiji lived. Now the situation has somewhat improved but much remains to be done. Observing the state of women's education in India, Swamiji lamented that he could not understand why so much difference was made between men and women, especially when Vedanta declared that one and the same Self was present in all beings. He quoted Manu to assert that daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons. This discrimination is made in every part of our society even now. It is not only in India. This malady is present all over the world. However, the fact is that all nations have attained greatness by paying proper respect to women. Swamiji therefore demanded forcefully that women must be put in a position so that they could solve their problems in their own way. Why not? Our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any other women in the world. These were Swamiji's bold words uttered in the 19th century. Look at the life of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother—how powerful she had been spiritually! Swamiji therefore urged his followers to spread female education the absence of which caused to a great extent India's degeneration. He pointed out unerringly that it was only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men and women were born. I see quite a lot of hints in the statements of Swamiji. Vivekananda's thinking on women's education is more significant today when, in the name of religion, the women in some countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan are deprived not only of education but also of health care and other basic human rights.

Education among the mass:



While the educationists today are trying to demonstrate the correlation between the development of economy and education, Swamiji perceived it more than hundred years ago. He said, 'I see it before my eyes, a nation is advanced in proportion as education and intelligence spread among the masses. The chief cause of India's ruin has been the monopolizing of the whole education and intelligence of the land by dint of pride and royal authority, among a handful of men. If we are to rise again, we shall have to do it in the same way, i.e. by spreading education among the masses.' [C.W., IV, p. 482] He also prescribed the means of achieving this goal, step by step.

First he gives a pedagogical suggestion. He says: Give them ideas. That is the only help they require. Then the rest must follow. Second, he suggested that the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue. The ideas must be taught in the language of the people. Third, he prescribed a cult of learning among them to sustain the education they received. Fourth, he emphasized the need for imparting training in life skills, trade, commerce and agriculture. Fifth, he said that mere provision of education was not enough. To begin with, he wanted that the self-sacrificing monks should go to the villages and teach them the secular subjects as well as religion and thus spread education from door to door. 'Why should not education go from door to door, say I If a ploughman's boy cannot come to education, why not meet him at the plough, . . . just wherever he is?' said Swamiji. [C.W., VIII, pp. 88-9]

Attempts have been made by the monks of the Math and Mission to fulfill some of his expectations through various programmes over the century. And some more new programmes are being launched on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Swamiji.

Science and Religion:

I conclude with the last idea of Swami Vivekananda. It relates to Swamiji's thought about the interaction between science and religion. Swamiji's spiritual contributions are well known. But very little is known about his scientific philosophy. He inspired Jamshedji Tata to establish a research institute for the development of science in India. Jamshedji later invited



Swamiji to steward the institute. But Swamiji had then passed away. Swamiji was well aware that in the new age science and religion would meet and shake hands. Poetry and philosophy will become friends and that will be the religion of the future.

A few days before Swamiji left his mortal body, he envisioned a university at Belur Math. He confided to Miss MacLeod that the spiritual power of Belur Math will last 1500 years and someday it will be a great university. 'Do not think I am imagining it; I see it,' he added.

Conclusion:

Swamiji's statements and messages are relevant even today. Frankly speaking, his ideas are even more necessary today to be practiced and realized than they were during his time—not only by Indians but by the people of the whole world.

To me every essence of education is concentration of mind, not the collecting facts. If I had to do my education over again, and had any voice in the matter, I would not study facts at all. I would develop the power of concentration and detachment, and then with a perfect instrument I could collect facts at will. (VI. 38-39)

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