

## Swami Vivekananda's Vision of Education: A Holistic Approach

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### Abstract:

Swami Vivekananda was one of the greatest luminaries of Bengal under colonial rule. In the nineteenth century, a large number of young, educated, rational, and progressive people took the initiative of reforming society, and hence they dealt with issues like illiteracy, the caste system, poverty, the subjugation of women, and so on. It was noteworthy that almost all these reformers considered education as the panacea for almost all social ailments. However, there were differences between the anglophile and those who believed in the indigenous and traditional mode of education. Vivekananda, a patriot-prophet, the most prominent disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa Dev, an illuminated-self and a centre of attraction to many Bengali erudite, delving into the ocean of spirituality, discovered that education might lead to the attainment of emancipation by incorporating knowledge of understanding the real-self and by removing divergent challenges of the mundane world. This article will highlight Vivekananda's notion of education. It will also illustrate the role of concentration, bramhacharya, and self-confidence as the inextricable elements of education. In this article, Vivekananda's views on female education and mass-education have been delineated. The article will project Vivekananda's recapitulation of Gurukul system as an alternative model of the existing institutional structure. The article will try to demonstrate how Vivekananda conceptualized the philosophy of man-making through his vision of education.

**Key Words:** Education, concentration, bramacharya, man-making, female education, mass-education

### Introduction:

In the nineteenth century, with the advent and consolidation of the foreign rule, the greatest minds and social reformers of India realised the need and utility of education for the emancipation of the toiling masses. Luminaries like Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, to name a few, propagated for educating the masses. Some of them introduced new academic curriculum and endeavoured to establish educational institutions to this effect. However, during this phase, two distinct tendencies could be identified for the promotion of education among the Indian population. The colonial ruler sought to promote English education to fulfil their colonial interests. A few erudite Indians were also in favour of imparting Western education in general. Some others were more concerned about the convergence of western pattern and the traditional Indian education system. Indeed, a few among them envisioned the resurgence of the ancient Indian marvel while they sought to revive the traditional knowledge system of India. Incidentally, behind the promotion of education and other reformatory initiatives, the primary inspiration was

reformation of Hinduism. The religiosity of the land had largely controlled the minds of the masses. On the other hand, religion represented righteousness and moral values of the individual, which happened to be the Essential elements of progress and emancipation. And, likewise, education treaded the path of enlightenment and true knowledge. Hence, education has been considered as an important indicator of social development. Vivekananda, with this aim in mind, advocated for the promotion of education among the masses.

### **The Basics of Education: Vivekananda's Views**

Vivekananda, having tried to find a suitable definition of education, raised some questions, "What is education? Is it book-learning? No. Is it diverse knowledge? Not even that." (Vivekananda, 1962:490, Vol. IV) He envisaged that education did not mean accumulation of wide range of information. Education was different from data collection because facts and information without having any utility and implications for developing the society and the level of consciousness of the learner would be considered meaningless. He succinctly mentioned, "If education is identical with information, the libraries are the greatest sages in the world, and encyclopaedias are the rishis." (Vivekananda, 1962:302, Vol. III) Vivekananda identified that the existing system of education train the pupils to gather facts and hence "The present system of education is all wrong. The mind is crammed with facts before it knows how to think." (Vivekananda, 1962:280, Vol. VIII) Vivekananda noticed the abundance of mindless accumulation of information in the West and he said, "It is one of the evils of your Western civilization that you are after intellectual education alone, and take no care of the heart. It only makes men ten times more selfish, and that will be your destruction." (Vivekananda, 1962:412, Vol. I) Education in this form has 'a little heart and no brain.' Hence he lamented that there remained little good elements in the prevailing system of education. He stated, "In the first place it is not a man-making education, it is merely and entirely a negative education. A negative education or any training that is based on negation is worse than death." (Vivekananda, 1962:301, Vol. III) One of the important aspects of education, as Vivekananda identified, was not to point out the mistakes; rather the scope and potential for rectification and betterment should be highlighted as well. He observed, "...in everything we must point out not the mistakes that people are making in their thoughts and actions, but the way in which they will gradually be able to do these things better. Pointing out mistakes, wounds a man's feelings." (Vivekananda, 1962:170, Vol. VII)

### **I. Essentials of Education: Manifestation of the Perfection**

To Vivekananda, real education showed the path of realising the ultimate potential of an individual by lifting the veil of ignorance. As the obstacles receded, streams of limitless knowledge and energy came out from oneself and eventually enlightened him. Hence, education was, as he believed, one of the most effective ways of overcoming the hindrance. In his own words, "Knowledge is inherent in man, no knowledge comes from outside ; it is all inside....What a man learns is really what he discovers by taking the cover of his own soul, which is a mine of infinite knowledge." (Vivekananda 1943:1) He stated, "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man". (Vivekananda 1943:1) In his definition of education, the word 'manifestation' implied that every individual had some latent virtues, and

education enabled one to unravel the dormant qualities. Vivekananda asserted, “All knowledge comes from the human soul. Man manifests knowledge, discovers it within himself, which is pre-existing, through eternity.” (Vivekananda 1943:2 ) From this analogy it was evident that individual had to teach himself. The external teacher only pushed the internal teacher so that the later could start performing its duty. Again, the term ‘perfection’ referred to the exposure to the realm of true knowledge. Hence, the primary objective of education should be to realize the dormant potential of an individual. Finally, the phrase ‘already in men’ referred to the fact that human beings were born with certain capacities and intellect. The natural endowment was innate to mankind. (Prabhananda, 2008: 23-24 ) Therefore, as Vivekananda envisioned, education implied nothing but the realisation and implementation of the ultimate human potential. The ‘perfection’ every individual had been endowed with aided in redressing the worldly problems. He firmly believed that education rendered support to withstand the tempests of mundane life, facilitated the development of fraternity in interpersonal relations, and made people fearless. Hence, education implied modification of behaviour and cultivation of a good personality within an individual.

## **II. Self-Reliance and Personality Development**

Vivekananda asserted that real education would turn a person into a self-reliant being. The mode and structure of education prevailing at that period did not have a holistic vision of human development. Therefore, he outrightly rejected that system of education. He castigated the existing mode of education, as it might have a degrading effect, instead of enriching in a true sense. (Yatiswarananda 2008: 43) This negative version of education appeared to him more fatal than embracing death. Hence Vivekananda raised a very pertinent question, “The education that does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy and the courage of a lion is it worth the name ?” (Vivekananda 1943:7) Indeed, the real education would be aiming at developing personality and building a strong character. He said, “We want that education by which character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s own feet.” (Vivekananda, 1962:342, Vol.V) For that matter, he prescribed certain schemes for the people of India as well as the people of the whole world in general. He emphasized the view that religion would be the cornerstone of education. Since the religion and philosophy reached the apex of glory in India, they should be treated as the fundamental ingredients of the Indian knowledge system. He considered religion as the quintessence of education. Religion, to him, was not mere adherence to any specific creed or practicing some sort of rituals. Religion transformed a beast into a human being and elevated a human being to the level of divinity. He said, “I look upon religion as the innermost core of education. Mind, I do not mean my own or anybody else’s opinion about religion. The true eternal principles haven to be held before people.” (Vivekananda, 1962:231, Vol.V) In his understanding, both religion and education had common goals. If education aided in realising human potential, religion aimed at attaining the inherent divinity. Indeed, religion liberated individuals from the circumstantial obstacles and ensured freedom of thought. And the prime object of education was the emancipation.

## **III. Self-confidence, Bramacharya & Self-respect**

Apart from religion, Vivekananda emphasized other important elements like concentration, brahmacharya, self-confidence, will-power, impartiality, proximity with the natural world and the Gurukul system. In his opinion, concentration was the key to gain true knowledge. He also believed that the more a person could be able to concentrate on any matter, the more one could get clearer picture. The power of human mind was infinite; the more human mind became focused the more strong it would develop. He said, “The very essence of education is concentration of mind...The more the power of concentration, the greater the knowledge that is acquired.”(Vivekananda 1943:9) Indeed, regular practice of meditation and self-control ultimately would end up attaining higher level of concentration. Vivekananda also mentioned that, besides practicing meditation regularly, one must develop impartial attitude so that he could move from one subject to another, without any prejudice. One of the important prerequisites of education was to keep faith on the subject matter of study. The practice of Bramhacharya would generate the faith in one’s mind. (Prabhananda, 2008: 17-18 ) However, by Bramhacharya, Vivekananda, referred to the freedom of thought, expression, speech and activities. He entailed that one observing complete bramhacharya, his mental strength and spiritual capacity would enhance to that extent that he would achieve a unique quality of learning instantly only by listening to any subject matter. By the observance of strict brahmacharya all learning could be mastered in a very short time. The chaste brain had tremendous energy and gigantic will-power. (Vivekananda, 1962:170,Vol.I)

Vivekananda also emphasized that the students must learn the art of self-respect. For, he believed, many students became victims of distractions and misleading thoughts in absence of faith in themselves. Consequently, in their earthly existence, neither he would be able to uplift himself nor he could devote himself for the welfare of others. (Vivekananda 1943:29 ) Vivekananda observed that the people of India had been confined themselves into an artificial and mechanical lifestyle. He pointed out that the rationale behind leading a superficial lifestyle was the absence of will-power among the masses. Actually the character of an individual would enhance the will-power. Character of a person was consisted of his attitude and habits. At some point of time, when some of the attitudes became consistent and unalterable, then it turned into habits. (Vivekananda 1943:30) For that purpose, Vivekananda warned students against indulging in any form of malpractices and they should abide by some standard moral norms. He believed that if the students would be able to foster an internal bond with the nature, they could fathom the essence of education. (Majumdar 1963:482 ) He was far-sighted enough to ask the learners to maintain a deep connection with the nature. During that period, the discussion on the individual-nature symbiotic relation was scant. Even the science and technology was not equipped enough to highlight the importance of the issue, or at least the western wisdom was yet to recognize the impact of ecology on human life.

#### **IV. Gurukul & Teacher-Learner Relation**

He envisioned the age-old system of ‘*Gurukul*’ *would* be the ideal system of education. “My idea of education is personal contact with the teacher-gurugriha- vāsa. Without the personal life of a teacher there would be no education.” (Vivekananda, 1962:224,Vol.V) He believed that the pupils studying in a residential academic institution would come in regular contact of the teacher. “One should live from his very boyhood with one whose character is like a

blazing fire and should have before him a living example of the highest teaching.” (Vivekananda, 1962:369, Vol.V) Moreover the well-regulated residential system of education would not only be beneficial for the holistic development of the students but also would make them disciplined, well-mannered and responsible beings. As Vivekananda strongly relied on the Gurukul system, he mentioned about some qualities that a real teacher should possess. A teacher must understand the essence of the subjects he taught. Basically the subject-matter of all renderings, “...are only words, syntax, etymology, philology, the dry bones of religion. The teacher who deals too much in words and allows the mind to be carried away by the force of words loses the spirit. It is the knowledge of the spirit of the scriptures alone that constitutes the true religious teacher. (Vivekananda, 1962:48-49, Vol.III) A teacher must be pure and ‘sinless’ from within else he might not be appeared before the learners as protector and preacher of ethics. Besides, “The true teacher is one who can throw his whole force into the tendency of the taught. Without real sympathy we can never teach well.” (Vivekananda, 1962:99, Vol.VII) However, it was also an illusion that the teacher was responsible for what an individual learned. The fundamental task of a teacher was to guide them to, “...apply their own intellect to the proper use of their hands, legs, ears, eyes, etc. and finally everything will become easy.” (Vivekananda, 1962:366, Vol.V) In his opinion a teacher must be endowed with the task of transmitting knowledge and “teaching is not imparting doctrines, it is communicating.” (Vivekananda, 1962:177-78, Vol.IV)

## **V. A Philosophy of Man-making**

Vivekananda’s philosophy of man-making had been reflected in his scheme of education. Under the broader rubric of the man-making initiative, his scheme of education included a blueprint that ensured development of body, mind and atman. He stated, “The ideal of all education, all training, should be this man-making. But, instead of that, we are always trying to polish up the outside....The end and aim of all training is to make the man grow.” (Vivekananda 1943:23) For the comprehensive growth of the learners he sought to incorporate subjects like religion, science, technology, aesthetics, ancient literature, classical languages and physical training. Vivekananda introduced physical exercise with the aim of harmonious development of mind and body. However, the focal point of education was religion and Science. Apart from that, he considered technology and Technical skills should be an inseparable part of scientific knowledge. For, he believed that the introduction of technology would enhance the scope of placement and expand the industrial sector. (Vivekananda 1943:31) In his opinion, aesthetics was one of the fundamental prerequisites for the equitable development of an individual as well as of the society as a whole. He believed that this sort of development would be actualised in reality with the confluence between education and its utility. Moreover, students would be acquainted with the cultures and traditions of their country once they started reading classic texts. (Yatiswarananda 2008: 41) Knowledge might elevate the status of people, but the level of glory and achievements could not last long if they failed to be familiarised with the culture of the land. He emphasised the importance of vernacular language as the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, he was not against learning other languages. To his mind, one should know multiple languages, which would be useful for studying religion, science, technology, and



classical texts. Again, he specifically mentioned the utility of learning the sanskrit language to understand the implications of the cultural heritage and traditions of the Hindu civilization. (Vivekananda 1943:59)

### **Education for the Women**

Vivekananda was equally concerned for the promotion of female education. In his opinion, India's progress would depend on the level of female education and education for all. This would also facilitate in resolving various issues and problems of the society. Nevertheless, Vivekananda noticed the apathy of the educated classes of India for promoting female education. (Vivekananda 1943:64) He asserted that Hinduism never put any sort of restriction on the promotion of female education. Hence, it would be the prime concern to educate all human beings irrespective of their biological identity. Education would enable them to understand the moral justifications and consequences of their deeds, which would restrict them from committing misconduct and immoral practices. (Vivekananda 1943: 67) He claimed that the only responsibility men had to carry out was to enable Women to get education. Besides, the primary concern for the women would be to equip them in such a way that they could resolve their problems. He said that once the women become educated, they would come forward to discuss about necessary reforms. In his consideration, women should learn about religion, science, the arts, household chores, cooking, sewing, sanitation, and healthcare. (Yatiswarananda 2008: 42) However, the basis of female education would be religion, and all other subjects would be treated as secondary. Education would be required for character building, practicing celibacy, and piety. He urged that education would be proven congenial for developing cognitive capacity, character building, and enhancing will-power. Moreover, women should be taught to be self-reliant.

For the promotion of education, Vivekananda sought to train some Brahmacharis and Brahmacharinis. As the Brahmacharis, embracing monkhood, would reach out to the masses in cities and villages, with an oath to spread education, the Brahmacharinis would take a similar initiative for teaching women. Vivekananda expressed his willingness to establish some academic centres for promoting women's education. (Vivekananda 1943: 11) He directed that those institutions would be managed and monitored by the educated and noble Brahmacharinis. The girls enrolled in those institutions would learn about mythology, history, household chores, arts, and morality with a scientific temper. He envisaged an elaborate plan for building a model monastery for women. Further, he stated that only the unmarried and relict women were to be entitled to stay inside the monastery. Seldom, some other devout ladies might be allowed to visit and stay within the monastery. (Vivekananda 1943:15) However, any sort of involvement of any male in the business of the monastery or any sort of contact of any male with the inmates of that institution was strictly prohibited. There would be a girls' school inside the campus where the pupils would learn about religious scriptures, literature, the Sanskrit language, grammar, and English, to some extent. Alongside, they would be trained in cooking, child-rearing, household management, and sewing. Apart from that, prayer, meditation and worship would, invariably be essential elements of education. The celibate women were to be entrusted with the task of teaching and preaching. In the future, they would promote women's education by opening educational units in villages and

cities. (Vivekananda 1943:16) Nivedita stated that Vivekananda used to spend hours discussing the various prospects of female education and contemplating establishing a Model School for women. He was also fond of illustrious discussions on the issues that were related to the promotion of female education. Even if many of his ideas appeared to be impractical, his ideas were certainly invaluable. (Prabhananda, 2008:22)

### **Education for All: Promotion of Mass Education and education for the Downtrodden**

Vivekananda considered mass education as the backbone of a nation. Hence, he incorporated the vision of Mass education in his scheme of education. He observed that in the existing social order, the educated class had occupied the upper strata; on the other hand, the common masses, being illiterate and ignorant, had been denigrated, for centuries, to the lower rung of society. Not only that the downtrodden population, being victims of suppression and oppression, had lost faith in themselves. They had been identified as slaves and compared with the filthy animals. He said, “The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost individuality. That is the great task between our people and princes. Up to now nothing has been done in that direction.” (Vivekananda, 1962:362, Vol.IV) The caste system prevailed in the Hindu social order, was largely responsible for the plight of the common masses, especially the lowly people were the worst sufferers. However, Vivekananda did not oppose the caste system, but he insisted on ensuring wider opportunities for the least well-off so that they might be rescued from their deplorable condition. He demanded equal opportunity to education for both the upper and lower strata of society so that they would become self-reliant and survive in the struggle for existence. He observed, “The only way to bring about the levelling of caste is to appropriate the culture, the education, which is the strength of the higher castes. That done, you have what you want.” (Vivekananda, 1962:291, Vol.III) Apart from studying history, geography, science, and literature, the impoverished population should have to be familiarised with the religious scriptures. He believed that education would impel them to involve in welfare activities and make them frugal. He also instructed that the people would be taught in native and mother languages so that they could fathom the essence of education and this would build a strong foundation of personal growth and progress of the society. Vivekananda said that, if needed, students should be taught at their home if they could not attend the classes at any educational institute due to financial crisis. He insisted on, reaching out to the most impoverished corners of the city, and disseminating knowledge of religion, astronomy and geography, in their local languages, by using simple tools like magic lantern, to the people belonging to distressed class. He believed that the ignorant, illiterate and poor section of the population, with the blessing of wide-spread mass education, would be awakened.

### **Conclusion**

To Vivekananda's mind, the ultimate aim of education was man-making, character- building and. In his educational schema, he visualized imparting valued education and subjects with practical applications in the modern age. Shraddha, brahmcharya, and confidence were the three main pillars of his vision of true education. One of the noteworthy aspects of his vision of education was that he advocated for the necessity of mass-education. Even he upheld the

importance of education for the amelioration of the distressed sections of the society. However, Vivekananda's notion of education has been criticised for its excessive reliance on religion. He earned fame as a religious preacher in colonial India and a representative of Hinduism in the world platform. Certainly, the vision of education he espoused would carry a religious overtone. Moreover, he considered education as a gateway to divulge the glorious past of the nation. Again, he tried to revive and preserve the traditions and the cultural heritage of the nation through his scheme of education. Despite being a religious propagator, he never supported any dogmas and conservative practices that could hinder the growth of the nation. Religion, to him, was the way to emancipation. He was contemplating to revive the ancient Gurukul system in his own time. The only motto was to provide a setup to the learners where they could dedicate themselves to studying without any distractions. Indeed, a number of schools and colleges, with residential facilities, have been established gradually throughout India. Under the aegis of Ramakrishna Mission, there are other preaching centres almost all over the globe which promote value education among the masses. In the ultimate analysis, Vivekananda's mission was to promote the philosophy of man-making, which he tried to visualise within his vision of education.

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