

**TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR EMPOWERMENT:
EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SPIRITUAL RENAISSANCE**

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Abstract

Two most significantly important tools for the purpose of receiving and imparting knowledge are comprehensive teaching and effective learning. True Education brings out or unveils the inherent goodness or perfection in man, thereby obliterating all petty and denigrating differences that had created rift between man and man. Sri Ramakrishna, a sage-philosopher and spiritual teacher of Swami Vivekananda, had also objected to conventional modes of Education and eulogized purity of human heart and an unveiling of one's true self as sole path towards enlightenment or Education. True Education is therefore not a mere conglomerate or assimilation of facts which happens to be the ulterior objective of formal Education. The idea of true or ideal Education subsumes variegated connotations. It not only entails a development of true wisdom and latent faculties of man but also development of human body through yoga.

Key Words : Empowerment, spiritual learning, renaissance...

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“Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man.”

-Swami Vivekananda.

No other generation has heard so much talk about the end of the world. Many fear that the world will end in a nuclear holocaust. Others think that pollution may destroy the world. Still others worry that economic chaos will set masses of humanity against one another. Some others apprehend that civilization would be obliterated by meaningless, denigrating and regressive rituals, superstitions and petty demarcations based on superficial considerations. A Euro-American bloc of economically prosperous states that fettered together for furtherance of their petty colonial interests, came to be christened as “First World” nations; another group of mostly socialist states got riveted to each other primarily as a defensive measure against “First World” nations and came to be known as “Second World” nations whilst some other nations that have lately been decolonized and are slowly making consistent efforts to slither up the clammy path of prosperity, came to be known as the “Third World” nations. Of late, the term “Fourth World” has received ample attention as these emerging, yet unrecognized nations in the global paradigm have been persistent in trying to make their presence felt amidst global economic trail-blazing nations. However, such geopolitical and economic compartmentalization’s of nations have, in turn, compartmentalized hearts of men. Nations have been segregated, kith and kins have been separated, humanity is crushed by the scourge of cold war; present day political scenario is like a ticking time-bomb waiting to be conflagrated at the slightest instigation. Tension, disharmony, distrust among nations, are rampant and a fourth holocaust in the form of a third world war, as foretold by Jesus, would mark “the last days”, seems to be in the offing: ‘Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom’(Matthew 24:7)

Panacea to such evils is possible through Education and spiritual enlightenment. Helen Keller, the epitome of perseverance, had once equated Education with enlightenment; she had avered that the ethereal light of Education had obliterated darkness of ignorance and superstition from her mind and had also made her more responsive to the divine light with which this world is aglow; she is able to see into “the life of things”; all the sights, sounds, hues of nature were visible to her metaphorical eyes(as she had no vision). Swami Vivekananda, the great sage and youth icon of the world, had emphasized on Education by which “character is formed, strength of mind is increased, the intellect is expanded, and by which one can stand on one’s feet.” He had also once famously declared that Education manifests the “perfection” that is

inherent in man. The ulterior motive of Education is to acquire knowledge, to know the unknown, to see the unseen, to traverse the yet uncharted territory of this earth, to seek knowledge ceaselessly and not to “rust unburnished”(as Ulysses had aspired for). In this regard also, He states that true knowledge is inherent in man, no knowledge comes from outside; it is all inside. The noble task, therefore, for man is to discover or unveil this vast knowledge latent in him. Human life is, therefore, a voyage of knowing, of unveiling, or discovering.

Two most significantly important tools for the purpose of receiving and imparting knowledge are comprehensive teaching and effective learning. True Education brings out or unveils the inherent goodness or perfection in man, thereby obliterating all petty and denigrating differences that had created rift between man and man. Swami Vivekananda believed that ‘every being is divine, is God. Every soul is a sun covered over with clouds of ignorance.’ Only when man is able to behold this divine light with which God’s creations are aglow, is he able to appreciate His greatness and treat all men as equal. This feeling of equality bestows confidence in the minds of man which eventually empowers him. The high ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity(as propagated aeons back by the French Revolution) will empower men and men will cease to view men belonging to less prosperous geopolitical blocs, as inferiors. Therefore, Education in the truest sense, acquired through in-depth teaching and all-round learning, empowers men and makes him aware of his true self, his ‘atma’ or soul that is eternal, transcendental and indestructible.

However, conventional modes or forms of imparting Education are incapable of or not conducive to the true spirit of wisdom or education that Swami Vivekananda had envisaged. ‘The things taught in schools and colleges are not an education, but the means of education.’(R.W. Emerson: Journal, July 15,1831.) Sri Ramakrishna, a sage-philosopher and spiritual teacher of Swami Vivekananda, had also objected to conventional modes of Education and eulogized purity of human heart and an unveiling of one’s true self as sole path towards enlightenment or Education. True Education is therefore not a mere conglomerate or assimilation of facts which happens to be the ulterior objective of formal Education. Had it been so, libraries would have become ‘the greatest sages in the world and encyclopaedias the rishis.’ Francis Bacon, the first of all modern essayists, had, in his famous essay, ‘Of Studies’, postulated that books are repositories of boundless information which, when gathered, impart knowledge. But for that knowledge to be effectively and sensibly implemented in practical scenario, we need an educated mind (that Bacon had termed as experience). Applying a gardening metaphor, Bacon had succinctly tried to prove his stance. Just as untamed and wild growth of ‘natural plants’ can be contained through ‘proyning’, likewise a human mind crammed with blatant facts, needs experience or a truly educated mind to glean those crammed facts and put it to optimum effective use in daily life. Hence, it can be safely stated that while our ancient sages and rishis envisaged true Education, they were certainly not referring to the formal means of acquiring knowledge but an awakening of true wisdom and an unveiling of the real self of man by scraping clouds of ignorance. Only then would man be able to establish a link with the ‘Divine’; every soul is the soul of God; every man is the manifestation of God. In other words, we are all His sons. No one is either inferior or superior to the other. We are all equal in

His eyes. As Milton, a God-fearing and deeply religious English poet, had avered in his sonnet, 'On His Blindness', God judges humans on whether they labour for Him to the best of their abilities; if someone becomes severely disabled, even he remains worthy in the sight of God. For, as Milton says in the last line of his poem, 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' Therefore, service to man is service to God. In this vast worldly stage, all men are mere actors simply enacting their roles. In the present day political scenario when a silent tension is constantly simmering among power blocs, when people belonging to the 'Fourth World' are constantly living in fear and apprehension, only a spiritual renaissance through enlightenment is capable of empowering people and instilling confidence in them.

Swami Vivekananda had stated that there is only one method of attaining knowledge, that which is called 'concentration.' William Shakespeare had lauded human beings as 'paragon of all creations.' It is only the degree of concentration that differentiates man and animals on the one hand, and man and man on the other. Only through intense concentration will man be able to unearth the casket of knowledge lying latent in his mind. As P.B. Shelley, in his celebrated 'Ode to the West Wind', had stated that his mind was like a simmering hearth or fire-place where ashes have accumulated, waiting to be re-kindled with a spark. Likewise his mind was pregnant with radical, iconoclastic ideas waiting to be disseminated; he was confident that his ideas would soon herald a new, reformed society thoroughly cleansed of all her evils. Similarly, human mind is like a smouldering hearth that needs slightest conflagration to blossom with its petals of knowledge. Genuine knowledge acquired through effective teaching and thorough learning obliterate all superficial differences created by vested interests, between man and man. It is through an awareness of self and that of other selves, that man feels empowered and equal.

In the antiquarian days, pupils had to stay in the ashramas of their gurus in the formative years of their lives, to acquire all-round development of mind and body. The students could therefore devote themselves heart and soul to the noble purpose of receiving Education, being cut-off from the inanities of mundane domestic existence. More the power of their concentration, greater is the knowledge that is acquired. Success in any field depends on the level of concentration. T .S. Avinashilingam, in his book, 'Education: compiled from the speeches and writings of Swami Vivekananda' celebrated the all-subsuming power of concentration. A highly concentrated mind becomes the master of all desires; it is no longer subservient to human instincts. He also cites the example of ancient Greeks who applied their concentration to the external world that resulted in efflorescence in art, literature, etc. Hindus, on the other hand, concentrated on the internal world which led to the development of the science of 'yoga'. Intense concentration and utmost devotion to 'karma' are therefore the pre-requisites for effective learning. Besides, a prospective learner should free his mind from four 'idols' (idola) which distort the truth by making learners opinionated (as envisaged by Francis Bacon). A truly learned individual is confident enough to raise his voice and protest against all forms of atrocities and oppression propagated against citizens of politically and economically weaker nations by vested interests of 'First World' nations. Proper learning empowers an individual to such an extent that he becomes uninhibited, fearless, persevering, patient,

protesting , truth-loving , honest , sincere, devoted and, above-all, self-believing. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary connotes the term 'empowerment' as something that gives power to or empowers (from an article by the author). The qualities that an individual acquires through learning , ennoble him and take him one step closer to God. He attains godliness when he practices noble, godly qualities. A truly initiated learner elaborately and pain-stakingly prepares his mind for the noble purpose of learning; all 'idols' of human mind are expunged and 'ego' done away with. Above all, 'What is most needed for learning is an humble mind'. (CONFUCIUS: The Book of History, IV, c.500 B.C.)

'Men learn while they teach.' (Homines, dum docent, discunt.) [SENECA: Epistulae morales ad Lucilium.] Evidently, effective learning presupposes comprehensive teaching. Here again, Swami Vivekananda's idea of an ideal teacher is far removed from the teachers imparting formal or conventional Education in schools, colleges and other educational institutions. Teachers are restricted by the demands of present day regressive marks-oriented educational system and they are almost compelled to follow a one-dimensional method of merely stating facts in conventional class rooms. Facts or information are piled upon information and conventional modes of examination tests the viability of a student on the basis of quantity of information that he has gathered; more the quantity of information, better rewarding will it be for the student. High scores in report cards stands him in good stead in this fiercely competitive job-market. However, when it comes to applying those crammed facts to managing practical affairs of life, he remains unsure and inconfident. However, this was not the case with old system of Education in India. Swami Vivekananda's idea of Education was 'Gururgha-vasa.' A learner or a disciple learns first lessons of his life from the personal life of the teacher. In other words, a teacher teaches through deeds, not through words. In antiquarian India, disciples used to stay at the ashramas of their gurus who were seers or sages practicing rigorous penance and immense fortitude. Same virtues were passed on to their disciples as teaching was considered a noble and sacred duty and it was considered sacrilege to charge money for the same. Students learnt as much from their teachers as from nature. William Wordsworth, the high priest of Romanticism, was infused with the pantheistic creed, i.e. nature and all objects of nature are imbued with a cosmic unity, a divine spirit unites and 'rolls through all things.' Human minds staying in close proximity with nature attain a strange tranquility; a calm and peaceful mind is able to comprehend the mystery that impregnates nature; nature is admired not merely as a source of physical sensation but also as a deeply emotional and ennobling spiritual force. Disciples not only learn penance and self-control from their gurus or spiritual teachers, but they also attain a spiritual succor from nature. An individual in perfect control of his desires, is able to face the rigorous challenges of life in an effective, unbiased and logical manner. He is neither flung into the deepest abyss at failures nor is he thrown into rapturous ecstasy on having succeeded. Such empowered individuals remain unperturbed by petty categorizations of geopolitical and economic power blocs and consider all men as equal. Eventually, people belonging to marginalized sections or nations gain confidence and self-belief and thereby they learn to live as empowered individuals with their heads held high.

The idea of true or ideal Education subsumes variegated connotations. It not only entails a development of true wisdom and latent faculties of man but also development of human body through yoga. Rishi Aurobindo, an eminent sage, philosopher, modern thinker and teacher had envisaged an educational system with a spiritual orientation, the integral methodology that involves education of every level of existence including both the physical and the mental. All the radical and iconoclastic ideas germinating in human mind need a healthy and able physique to be effectuated into reality. In other words, theoretical and idealistic ideas could only be put to practical use through an exercise of physical faculties. Sri Aurobindo's vision too was of a 'divine life in a divine body.' Proper physical education through yoga and other physical activities help in the control and synchronization of bodily movements. This is done in accordance with the yogic philosophy of education which strives to make the gross material body fit for the 'higher power and consciousness to manifest.' At the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, there is a separate department of physical education that regularly organizes sports and games and other physical activities to train the bodies of students in highest discipline and control. This is in keeping with Sri Aurobindo's vision. In this regard, he believed that 'good humour and tolerance,...friendliness to rivals, equal acceptance of victory or defeat without bad humour', are some of the virtues associated with the sporting spirit which, in course of time, helps the students in the progress of both national and international lives. Physical education through yogasanas and other physical activities remains one of the seminal forms of education which is again instrumental in instilling confidence in the minds of men and empowering them. They soon develop a feeling of cosmopolitanism and consider themselves as world citizens. With a surge in this feeling of liberalism and cosmopolitanism and solidification of their sense of belonging, superficial compartmentalizations into power blocs will soon develop fissures and the day is not far when 'the Lamb' will lie down peacefully with 'The Tyger'.(as envisioned by William Blake centuries before.)

P.B. Shelley, an eminent poet of the Romantic period, had envisioned a 'Golden Millennium' for future. Being a poet of unflinching hope and insurmountable optimism, he strongly believed in the possibility and practicability of a completely reformed society, the futuristic 'Golden Millennium' where forces like 'Positive Institutions' would be completely ineffective and inoperative. Further, drawing from Godwin's (an eminent philosopher) theory on evil, Shelley too believed that human society was absolutely perfect when it was created. All evils and aberrations that might have crept up in this perfect society, are merely accidental, hence can be completely done away with or cleansed. A society completely ridden of all her evils where man will be able to reside without any fear, terror, tension, a society epitomizing the high ideals of the French Revolution, 'Liberty', 'Equality' and 'Fraternity', a society where power will not be wielded by any vested interests but by empowered individuals, a society emblematic of heaven on earth, is the society that our poet had dreamt of aeons back. However, in our modern society, syncopated by disharmony, disillusionment, fragmentation of human identity and dejection, modern man has become 'patients etherized' on a table (as apprehended by T. S. Eliot) looking up into darkness 'driven and derided by vanity', his face burning with 'anguish and anger'.(James Joyce's "Araby"). Worse is the scenario for people belonging to oppressed and marginalized sections as they have to constantly bear the brunt of

discrimination and racism and compartmentalization. The panacea to such evils lies in true education and enlightenment. However, people belonging to 'Fourth World' often hail from poorer or weaker strata of society; hence they are often denied the basic rights including the right to Education. A truly empowered or learned individual works for the betterment and development of human kind. He should therefore deem it to be his noble duty to initiate such deprived people into the wondrous and enriching arena of Education and disseminate knowledge. 'Everybody who is capable of learning has taken to teaching.' (Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying, 1889"). Every learner who has been effectively empowered through comprehensive teaching, takes to teaching; true Education entails spreading of a divine light to subsume the darkness of ignorance.

The single most significant objective of Education is to build character. According to Swami Vivekananda, the character of any man is

"..but the aggregate of his tendencies, the sum total of the bent of his mind. As pleasure and pain pass before his soul, they leave upon it different pictures, and the result of these combined impressions is what is called a man's character."

We are actually a conglomerate of what our thoughts, good or bad, have made us. Employing a lake metaphor, we can say that just as a small ripple which, when subsides, does not completely dissolve into oblivion but leaves behind its mark, likewise human actions, good or bad, do leave behind an equivalent impression on human minds. An amalgamation of such impressions forms human character and his subsequent actions are dictated by his character. It is therefore the noble task of education to empower an individual to glean out the good and discard the vile. Besides, the ideal of all Education should be man-making or personality development. Evidently, an empowered individual has a strong and magnetic personality that exudes an aura of its own. Others cannot but be influenced by such a powerful personality; his sense of awe and wonder almost compels him to listen to the words of wisdom spoken by the empowered individual. However, words spoken by an individual create one-thirds of impression, the rest is created by the man himself. The ideal of all Education is therefore to build a strong personality. A teacher possessing a magnetic personality and steadfastness of character will automatically influence a student; the student in turn, develops a strong personality and grows up into an empowered individual and carries forward the legacy of his teacher. A nation of such empowered individuals can never be shorn of positive energy, taintless character, good thoughts and deeds.

As stated earlier, the term 'empowerment' has variegated and all-subsuming connotations. Power is the natural offshoot of a truly learned and confident mind, throbbing with creative energy and enthusiasm. However, unmitigated power should not be misutilized as modes of oppression. Herein lies the significance of noble work carried out by teachers through their teaching. They should ensure full blossoming of true wisdom and latent knowledge of their disciples. As the phrase 'AdhyatmaVidyaVidyanam' (in the 10th Chapter of the "Bhagavad Gita") means true Education is that education which awakens the spirit in man. Therefore teachers carry out the noble task bestowed on them by the Hindu Holy Scripture.

Empowered by true learning and brimming with confidence, the learners spread the messages of Equality of all man in the eyes of God, and brotherhood. They are the messengers of a new 'Golden Millennium' of empowered individuals, a 'new' world where all power blocs would cease to exist; in other words, it is true empowerment through proper teaching and learning that rapidly spreading vicious tentacles of corrupt power can be curbed. Above all, it is in empowerment that emancipation of mankind lies; in other words, 'Become the change you want to see/ those are words I live by.'

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