



Swami Vivekanand and His Educational Philosophy: Revisiting its Relevance in the Contemporary Educational Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Swami Vivekanand, a prominent figure in Indian philosophy, left an ineradicable mark not only in India but on the world with his profound teachings, knowledge and ideas. Among his many contributions, his philosophy on education remains pertinent and influential in the modern world. In this context, this paper tries to revisit the relevance of Vivekanand's educational philosophy in the contemporary educational discourse of India. In highlighting so, it stabs to understand his philosophy on the holistic development and its significance in the time where achievement in competitive exams and career-oriented course has become parameter of educational success. Further, it also attempts to shed light on the character-building approach of Vivekanand, wherein he emphasizes on the moral aspect of education. This article underscores the importance of mother tongue in the age of English

medium education. It also explicates his advocacy for education of the masses and the importance of women's education.

Introduction

India has undergone a significant transformation in its educational paradigms, evolving from the traditional gurukul system characterized by direct, immersive teacher-student interactions to the contemporary online education model, where physical presence is no longer a necessity. The gurukul systems of education was focusing not only on the academic achievement i.e. marks attained in the exam but also emphasizing on the character building, self-realization and self-actualization of the students. Later on, with the passage of time Indian system of education has also witnessed the change in the aims of education i.e. character building and realization of the self in the traditional India to the achievement-oriented discourse in modern India. National Education Policy, 2020 has mapped this change in the following manner, "The aim of education in ancient India was not just the acquisition of knowledge as preparation for life in this world, or life beyond schooling, but for the complete realization and liberation of the self" (NEP, 2020, p. 4). However, the present educational discourse in highly achievement oriented, wherein not only the students are in race to get success in their respective fields but also their parents and surroundings analyze their success mostly through the material lens i.e. getting government employment, highly paid jobs or admission in reputed higher education institutions. They pay less attention on the physical, emotional, moral, self-realization and aesthetic dimensions of education. These aspects of education are losing their significance against the material success in the field of education. Similarly, the mushrooming of sub-standard and unrecognized English medium schools not only in rural area (Bhosale, Aulakh and The Economic Times, 2010) but also in urban area is one of the dominating aspects of the present-day educational discourse. The "craze for English education is depriving many children from a real education" (Mody, 2015). Moreover, it is also discernible from the present educational discourse that the marginal section of the society (AISHE 2020-21) and women (NSSO, 2015) are not adequately represented in education in general and higher education in particular.

Against this background, this article is a modest attempt to analyze and accentuate the educational philosophy of Vivekanand in the contemporary educational discourse. In highlighting this, it attempts to understand his holistic development approach in the context of achievement orientated era. It also tries to underscore the importance and relevance of character building in the time when materialistic

achievement is pervasive. It examines the significance of mother tongue in the age of English medium education and schools. Last but not the least, this article also makes an attempt to understand and examine the gravity of Vivekanand's philosophy when marginal section of the society and women are not adequately represented in education in general and higher education in particular.

This study systematically reviews various secondary and primary sources to substantiate the arguments. By analysing existing literature, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, newspapers, and unpublished materials, this research tries to analyse the relevance of Vivekanand's philosophy with a particular focus on character building, holistic development, mother tongue, education of masses and women's education. Through a comprehensive synthesis and comparison of these sources, the study aims to develop a nuanced understanding and significance of Vivekanand's philosophy in the present-day educational discourse.

Holistic Development in the Era of Academic Success

“Who is Aditya Srivastav, UPSC civil services topper 2023” (Sharma, 2024) and “UPSC exam results: youth from J&K's Anantnag secures 7th rank” (The Print, 2023); these are some headlines appear after the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) result came out in the public sphere. At the same time, there are also news headlines which cherish the success of aspirant from the downtrodden section of society. For example, “son of civic sweeper cracks UPSC exam” (The Economics Times, 2024). Similarly, there was news of a coolie who became an IAS officer (Tandon 2022). In the same vein, there is also celebration of getting admission in the elite institutions of higher education. The headline follows: “inspiring journey: truck driver's son drives his way to IIM-Lucknow” (Jain, 2024). Likewise, there is another news headline which celebrates the success of truck mechanic daughter for National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) (Zee News 2024). These above-mentioned headlines suggest that there is a celebration of academic success specifically the intellectual success. These are official news celebrating the success of the students belonging from different socio-economic and cultural background. Similarly, News and videos on the achievement of aspirants are also being shared by their friends and relatives on the social media such as Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites. These evidences indicate the celebration of academic achievement of students in competitive exams and jobs. This kind of celebration carrying great valor and success overpower the effort and hard work of the other students, who have just missed the finishing line, the success in the examinations and jobs.

On the other hand, in many cases, due to the failure in the examination or under the academic pressure students take their valuable life. For example, “20-year-old NEET aspirant commits suicide in Kota; 8th incident of the year” (Rawat, 2024). There are a lot of reporting on the suicide of students in Kota, a hub of coaching institutes for engineering and medical courses. According to a report published in the online newspaper:

The police data reveals concerning trends of student suicide cases in Kota over the past years: there were 15 cases in 2022, 18 in 2019, 20 in 2018, 7 cases in 2017, and 17 and 18 cases in 2016 and 2015, respectively. Notably, there were no suicides reported in 2020 and 2021 which might be due to the closure or online operation of institutes amid the COVID-19 pandemic. (Rawat 2024)

“According to the National Crime Records Bureau’s Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India (ADSI) report, 2020, around 8.2% of students in the country die by suicide” (Sarveswar and Thomas, 2022). Similarly, there are also cases and studies illustrating that the competitive examinations and job-oriented exams have badly impacted the mental and emotional health of students (Pachole, 2023). Even, there are cases highlighting that medical students are also suffering from mental ailments (Sharma, 2024). The above-mentioned two types of cases: first, celebration of success in the academic field and second; loosing life, distress, suffering and agony due to failure in the examinations underline that these two dimensions revolve mostly around intellectual or cognitive aspects of education and neglect other dimensions of the holistic development.

In this context, an examination of Vivekananda’s tenets, which underline holistic development, is of significant scholarly value. He believed that education should not only focus on intellectual growth but also on nurturing physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of an individual. He emphasized the importance of physical fitness and advocated for the inclusion of sports, physical activities, “music and art” (Vivekanand, 2008, p. 105-107) in the curriculum. From the above-mentioned facts, it is obvious that in today’s academic world where stress and mental health issues are prevalent, Vivekanand’s emphasis on holistic development offers a valuable framework for educators to ensure the well-being of students. The importance and relevance of his philosophical tradition could be analyzed by citing the NEP, 2020, wherein, new policy document implicitly proclaims the significance of holistic development in following manner: “A holistic and ... education would aim to develop all capacities of human beings -intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral in an integrated manner. Such an

education will help develop well-rounded individuals that possess critical 21st century capacities ...” (NEP, 2020, p. 36). This alludes that NEP, 2020 also follow and cherish the importance of the holistic development as advocated by Swami Vivekanand.

Character Building in the age of Materialistic Achievement

According to Cambridge English dictionary, character building means “helping to make someone emotionally stronger, more independent and better at dealing with problems” (online Cambridge English dictionary). This seems narrower definition of character building. On the other hand, scholars like Mahadevan (2013) while describing character building, include the “strength and gentleness, broadmindedness and faith, fearlessness and compassion” (p. 2-5). It is worth quoting a letter of Swami Vivekananda written on August 20, 1893 to Alasinga Perumal, which describe tersely the hallmarks of an individual developing inner strength and *character* (emphasis added):

A hundred thousand men and women fired with the zeal of holiness, fortified with eternal faith in the Lord, and nerved to lion’s courage by their sympathy for the poor and the fallen and the downtrodden, will go over the length and breadth of the land, preaching the gospel of salvation, the gospel of help, the gospel of social raising up-the gospel of equality. (Quoted in Mahadevan, 2013, p. 1).

This excerpt from Vivekanand’s letter meticulously pronounces the different dimensions of character building. He further states:

If you really want to judge of the character of a man, look not at his great performances. Every fool may become a hero at one time or another. Watch a man do his most common actions (emphasis added); those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man. Great occasions rouse even the lowest of human beings to some kind of greatness, but he alone is the really great man whose character is great always, the same wherever he be. (Vivekanand, 2008, p. 108-109)

Vivekanand underlined the common action of the man not his great performance while judging the character and he also says that a great man is that whose character is great. Further, he highlighted the virtues of character which emphasizes on the (a) “faith in one’s divine self (b) truth, unselfishness, love, and service (c) strength and (d) patriotism” (Vivekanand, 2008, p. 111). These virtues are important part of the character. This shows that Vivekanand placed a great weightage on the character building as an essential aspect of education. He believed that education should instill values such as honesty, integrity,

compassion, unselfishness, truth, service and self-discipline in students. To him, true education is not just about acquiring knowledge but also about developing noble character that guide one's actions.

However, if we see the present-day educational discourse which is driven by the highly competitive edge, success and materialistic achievement, fail to give importance to the character development. As mentioned above, now a days educational discourse generally celebrates the success of students in the competitive exams (Jain, 2024 and Zee News, 2024) and job-oriented exams (Sharma, 2024, The Print, 2023; The Economic Times, 2024) and fail to underscore the character-building aspect. It has also been found that parents also overlook the development of character among their wards. They are more worried and conscious about the materialistic achievement of their children. In other words, "Indian parents have very high expectations about their children's education and careers" (Raghavan 2015). There is also study arguing that 82 percent parents are involved in deciding their child's career (The Economics Times, 2015). This means that now a days Indian parents are more concerned about the future of their wards i.e. the materialistic achievement and ignore other dimensions of education particularly character formation. Similarly, the NEP 2020 also narrowly emphasizes on the character building under the heading of 'holistic development of the learner'. The policy document asserts, "The aim of education will not only be cognitive development, but also *building character* (emphasis added) and creating holistic and well-rounded individuals equipped with the key 21st century skills" (NEP, 2020, p. 12). Therefore, in the present society where moral values and character building are often ignored, Vivekanand's emphasis on character building provides a much-needed perspective for educators and public discourse to cultivate ethical, sensible and responsible citizens for the growth and development of this nation.

Mother Tongue and Dominance of English Language

It is a well-established fact that the "children learn best when they are taught in their mother tongue" (McCaffrey and Jhingran, 2024). Mother tongue "builds strong foundation; it is a bridge for understanding the concept and it also boosts confidence and self-esteem among students" (Sundararajan, 2024). It has also been said that the original thinking and the best research are carried out in the mother tongue. Keeping these premises in mind, it is inevitable to quote Vivekanand's idea on the same. He argues in the follower manner:

The language in which we naturally express ourselves, in which we communicate our anger, grief, or love, etc. there cannot be a fitter language than that. We must stick to that idea, that



manner of expression, that diction and all. No artificial language can ever have that force, and that brevity and expressiveness, or admit of being given any turn you please, as that spoken language. Language must be made like pure steel turn and twist it any way you like; it is again the same it cleaves a rock in twain at one stroke, without its edge being turned. Our language is becoming artificial by imitating the slow and pompous movement and only that of Sanskrit. And language is the chief means and index of a nation's progress. (Vivekanand, 2008, p. 82-83)

The above-mentioned excerpt elucidates the idea of Vivekanand emphasizing the importance of the mother tongue. On the other hand, if we analyze the love and affection for mother tongue or vernacular language as a medium of instruction at schools, then the situation is a matter of grave concern. Borooah and Sabharwal (2017) calculated the data from the NSSO 71st & 64th round, after applying sample weights, they assert that the data “shows that there is a social transformation taking place, with an overall decline in the use of Hindi and regional languages as the medium of instruction (from 46 percent in 2007 to 44 percent in 2014 for Hindi, and 36 percent in 2007 to 31 percent in 2014 for regional languages” (Borooah and Sabharwal, 2017, p. 6). This implies that the preference for Hindi or other regional language is declining in contemporary India.

On the other hand, it has been found that students and their parents are more inclined towards the English medium education or schools. The inclination and predilection towards the English language and education is not a new phenomenon. Its history could be traced back to the colonial rule, when Macaulay imposed English education on Indian people and tried to create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Quoted in Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy, 2006, p. 31-32). Since then, English education has gathered importance in the mind of elite people and later on after independence, it's imagined and perceived importance also gets percolate to the common mass of this country. The significance of English education could be examined from two distinct perspectives:

On an individual level, English-medium education has been a ticket to vertical mobility in Indian society. At the societal level, English-medium education has played a critical role in producing what Kothari (1993) calls a modernised techno managerial elite that continues to have disproportionate influence in shaping the discursive terrain of development, and thereby policies and programmes that affect the social fabric of the country. Less visibly, English-medium education widens social fractures in Indian society by creating and reinforcing a social, cultural,

economic, and discursive divide between the English-educated and the majority. (Faust and Nagar, 2001, p. 2878)

The perceived importance of English education led the demand for the same. This led to the development of sub-standard and unrecognized English medium schools in rural (Bhosale, Aulakh and The Economic Times, 2010) and urban areas as well. Even there is an attempt to convert government Hindi medium schools to the English medium (Business Standard, 2021). “The move is aimed at honing English speaking skills of children studying in the government schools, right from the beginning, so that they can compete with missionary and convent school students” (Business Standard, 2021). There is also a belief among parents and students that English medium education has a higher percentage of employability (Bhosale, Aulakh and The Economic Times, 2010). The perceived higher opportunities of employment through English education, “parents’ obsession” (The Indian Express, 2024) and high aspiration for English medium school education are a stumbling block in the avenue of good vernacular language schools or educational institutions of mother tongue. It is also evident that “English has become a dominating academic language at the cost of other national language and research topic of local importance” (Altbach, 2007, p. 3608). In this context, it can be posited that Vivekananda’s emphasis on the importance of the mother tongue holds considerable potential for application within contemporary educational discourse. His thought also gets substantiation when NEP 2020 highlights the need and importance of mother tongue in the following manner:

Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language. Thereafter, the home/local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible. This will be followed by both public and private schools. (NEP, 2020, p. 13)

This excerpt from NEP 2020 illuminates that to encourage the original and critical thinking among the new generation or children, it is needed to give them education in the local or mother tongue. The emphasis on the mother tongue by NEP 2020 is the testimony of the relevance of philosophical approach of Vivekanand.

‘Education of the Masses’

“According to the report of All India Survey on Higher Education (2020-21), Of 4.13 crore students enrolled in 2020-21, 14.2% belong to Scheduled Castes, 5.8% belong to Scheduled Tribes, 35.8% are from Other Backward Classes and remaining 44.2% students are from other communities” (p. ii).

Further report states that “4.6% students belong to Muslim Minority” (All India Survey on Higher Education, 2020-21, p. 14). From the above cited data, it is evident that two groups of people particularly Scheduled Tribes and Muslims are not adequately represented in higher education in proportion to their population. This suggests that they are at the margins as far as their representation in higher education is concerned. From the above-mentioned facts, it could be deciphered that education in general and higher education in particular is yet to reach to the common masses particularly Muslims and Scheduled Tribes of this country.

In this background, it is pertinent to highlight Vivekananda's philosophical advocacy for mass education. He observes: “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... among a handful of men. If we are to rise again, we shall have to do it ... by spreading education among the masses” (Vivekanand, 2008, p. 68). In his opinion, any nation can progress provided that her masses are educated and intelligence. In the same vein, he further advocates that, “The only service to be done for our lower classes is to give them education, to develop their lost individuality. They are to be given ideas; their eyes are to be opened to what is going on in the world around them; and then they will work out their own salvation” (Vivekanand, 2008, p. 68). This excerpt suggests that he vehemently supported for the education of lower classes which will develop their individuality, knowledge and understanding around the globe. This also indicates that for he advocated comprehensive development of lower classes through the education. The importance of education for the large section of the society has also been advocated by another towering figure, Dr. Ambedkar. He states, “Education is something which ought to be brought within the reach of everyone” (Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, 1982, Vol. 2, p. 40). In addition to this, he further states:

Education ought to be cheapened in all possible ways and to the greatest possible extent. I urge this plea because I feel that we are arriving at a stage when the lower orders of society are just getting into the high schools, middle schools and colleges, and the policy of this department, therefore, ought to be to make ... education as cheap to the lower classes as it can possibly be made. (Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, 1982, Vol. 2, p. 40-41)

Therefore, the idea of Vivekanand i.e. ‘education of the masses’ and Ambedkar’s philosophy advocating ‘education for everyone’ should be taken into consideration, if we really want to rise in the globalized world. In the absence of his philosophy, any nation cannot achieve the aim of holistic development.

‘Educating the Women’

“According to Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (rural) report 2022, ‘all India figure for 11-14-year-old girls not enrolled in school stands at 2%. This figure is around 4% only in Uttar Pradesh and is lower in all other states” (ASER, 2023, p. 49). Report further reveals that “7.9% girls of 15-16-year-old are not enrolled in schools” (ASER, 2023, p. 49). This significant report also underlines, “Only 3 states have more than 10% of girls in this age group out of school: Madhya Pradesh (17%), Uttar Pradesh (15%), and Chhattisgarh (11.2%)” (ASER, 2023, p. 49). From the above-mentioned facts, it appears that there is long way to get 100 percent enrollment of girls at school level particularly in the backward states of this country. Moreover, women’s higher education status is also telling similar story. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) report 71st round (2015) maps the percentage distribution of students by gender pursuing general and technical/professional courses, states that “40.5% of females have opted for the science discipline. On the other hand, 59.5% of male candidates are in the science discipline” (NSSO, 2015, p. 16). Similarly, the report further observes that the representation of male candidates in the “discipline of engineering (75.2%), law (63.9%) and management (62.3%); whereas share of female counter parts in engineering (24.8%), law (36.2%) and management (37.7%)” (NSSO, 2015, p. 16). These data show that the female candidates are not adequately represented in science discipline and other professional courses and lagging behind in comparison to their male counterpart. In the same vein, “according to all India survey on higher education (2020-21), A total of 2.12 crore (51.3%) male and 2.01 crore (48.7%) female students were enrolled in higher education” (All India Survey on Higher Education 2020-21, p. ii). The report vociferously underscores that male candidates are more represented in higher education in comparison to the female candidates.

Having said that, it is inevitable to analyze the idea of Vivekanand on education for women. He expresses, “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them” (Vivekanand, 2008, p.74). He further elucidates:

One does not find any real endeavour in your country to get the women educated. You, the men, are educating yourselves to develop your manhood, but what are you doing to educate and advance those who share all your happiness and misery, who lay down their lives to serve you in your homes? (Vivekanand, 2008, p.74)

His deep concern for women's education becomes evident through his argument, “It is seen from the official statistics that only three or four per cent of the people in India are educated, and not even one per cent of the women” (Vivekanand, 2008, p.74). Further he says:

It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men are born. And you have reduced your women to something like manufacturing machines; alas, for heaven’s sake, is this the outcome of your education? The uplift of the women, the awakening of the masses must come first, and then only can any real good come about for the country, for India. (Vivekanand, 2008, p.76)

These above-mentioned excerpts of Vivekanand manifest that he fervently advocated for the education of women and reasoned that great men are born in the house of *educated and pious* (emphasis added) mothers. Given this context, it could be said that on the one hand, we have achieved a lot as far as education of women is concerned, while on the other hand, there is an immediate need to bring our left-out women folk to the mainstream and educate them as higher as we can.

Conclusion

Contemporary educational discourse is predominantly characterized by a focus on success in competitive examinations and securing government employment. Additionally, students are frequently evaluated based on their examination performance and job attainment, often at the expense of holistic development, a principle to which Vivekananda's philosophy is firmly committed. In the dominance of materialistic achievement, the notion of character formation or character building is not being adequately taken care of, in this context, Vivekanand’s understanding has enough potential to shed light on the importance of character formation for the comprehensive development of students or individual. The dominance and inclination towards English language and schools not only in urban India but also in rural part demonstrates that the love for mother tongue as a medium of instruction is not getting due attention despite the fact that the children enthusiastically learn in mother tongue. Therefore, the philosophical idea of Vivekanand emphasizing the importance of mother tongue is having worth prospects to cultivate the original idea and thinking among the students, which is also being alluded and emphasized in the NEP 2020. His philosophy on the education for common masses and women is fervently required to uplift the downtrodden section of the society and women, so that they can contribute to the growth and development of the nation. Succinctly, it can be argued that in an age marked by success in competitive exams and career-oriented courses, dominance of English language and

education, relegation of mother tongue at the school level and marginalization of common masses and women; Vivekanand's timeless wisdom on education offers a beacon of hope for creating education systems that not only impart knowledge or intellectual development but also cultivate righteous individuals.

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