

Meaning And Purpose Of Education: Through The Lens Of Platonic And Gandhian Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins with a general idea of what education is generally understood to be before going on to briefly state what it means for Plato and Gandhi. Thereafter, the paper intends to examine the meaning and purpose of education. Consequent to this, the paper looks at the Platonic idea of education and how it is successful in leading a society towards good governance. The paper then goes into a detailed analysis of the Gandhian philosophy of education and its ultimate purpose lying beyond the material. The conclusion would infer certain similarities between the two outlooks.

Keywords - Education, descriptive sense, prescriptive sense, governance, curriculum, elementary, higher education, dialectic, harmonious development, kelavani, literacy, basic education.

Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.
Albert Einstein

Introduction

Education greatly enhances the sensibilities and capabilities of people to judge and question the norms under which they must live. It helps people in making educated choice. Faculties of rational judgment that are required for good and just governance are developed through education. Therefore, education is essential for maintenance of justice in society. Education is also related to other important aspects of human life e.g., with human nature, with the growth and development of children, with knowledge and understanding, with morals and religion, so much so that education can be said to be one of the supporting pillars of a society. Education leads to ordering of human society. In fact, in a way education becomes responsible for stratification in human society. It not only helps one achieve a better understanding, a wider perspective of social situations but also enables one to capitalize on the life chances that come one's way and successfully convert them to one's advantage. Thus, education is an instrument that helps society to preserve its present integrity as well as future survival.

Plato and Gandhi have their own respective theories of education. What is common among these two is the surprisingly similar position they take regarding the function of education. Each of them believes in the prescriptive nature of education. Their respective theories may deal with different issues but within their philosophical framework each of them considers the value of education in fulfilling some social end. In what follows, let us first examine in detail the general meaning and purpose of education wherein the descriptive and prescriptive meanings shall be explained.

Education: Meaning and Purpose

Education can be understood in two ways – descriptive and prescriptive. In its descriptive sense 'education' is a collective noun that represents, as T. W. Moore put it "a complicated network of institutions and practices designed to bring the young into society by initiating them into the current culture, the intricate pattern of practices, assumptions and expectations which make up social life."¹ While dealing with the descriptive character of education one tries to determine what education can or does, do in society. For example, when a historian of education or a student of comparative education or a sociologist of education tries to study the characteristics of education, he studies it as a social phenomenon. This kind of study results in a theory about education which is descriptive in nature. However, there is another point of view in which the central concern

is the prescriptive nature of education. It believes that education ought to serve certain social ends whether or not it does so in fact. Our present day thinking about education is largely influenced by the prescriptive or ideological element in education.

According to Strike, three issues about education that must be addressed by any society are that “it must have a view of the characteristics of people it wishes to produce. Second, it must have a view of the role of education in maintaining or altering the institutions of society. Third, it must have a view of the role of education in the distribution of the goods and services that society produces.”² So, the purpose of education is directly correlated with the quality of society we seek to inhabit and its role being pivotal in every aspect from personal to institutional.

Education paves the way for good governance: Plato

Plato attached a lot of importance to education because he considered it the most reliable method for removing obstacles from the path of good governance. He believed that it is only with the help of education that the ruler can channelize the human nature in the right direction. It is through such channelization alone that a harmonious state can be realized. Since he regarded education to be so significant, he took care to devote himself to the development of the idea of education with meticulous care. He dedicated such an exalted place to education in his ideal state that some people feel it to be the main concern of *The Republic*. Underlining the importance that Plato gives to education, Sabine writes that “Rousseau said that the book was hardly a political work at all but was the greatest work on education ever written.”³ Plato’s sincerity towards education can be judged from the extent of thought that Plato invested in his theory of education.

Plato’s theory of education was based on the principle that education should be designed in such a way that it encouraged the recipients to realize their fullest potential. He believed, like all Greeks, that society or state was the primary educational institution. Therefore, he felt that guidance and instructions could be secured best from the state by residing in the state and for the state. Plato realized the fact that unless the citizens were well educated, they would not be able to see through the hindrances that come in their way and deal with emergencies as and when they would arise. For him, any difficulty could be surmounted provided the citizens were equipped with a good system of education. He saw a very wide scope or improvement in the quality of life of the citizens with the help of education. Therefore, he considers education to be an integral and essential part of the state’s functions and even goes to the extent of saying that no matter how well it fulfills its other functions, if the state neglects education, then everything else becomes negligible.

Having granted such a high degree of importance to education, Plato realized that the responsibility of education could not be left in greedy or careless hands. Plato had witnessed the dire consequences of leaving the choice with every man to provide such education for his children as according to his fancy or purchase such education for them as was being offered by the market. He had seen that in such a system people became so irresponsible that they employed better efforts in training of a colt than proper training of their own children. That is why Sabine claims that Plato believed that the state should be the sole provider of education lest other suppliers who would only be happy to turn it into commercial and profitable venture.⁴ According to Plato at least in a state supervised system there was no scope for such blatant violation that led to a compromise with an individual’s development which would subsequently end up affecting the quality of the resources available to the state.

In the Platonic scheme the curriculum of education consists of two stages – the lower or the elementary, and the higher. The elementary or the lower education includes the training of young people up to the age of twenty and leads to a career in the military. In the lower stage, education comprises of training of gymnastics and teaching of music. Gymnastic would train the body while music would help improve the soul. Since, training is to begin at a very early age; music plays a dominant role during infancy. Higher education, which is intended for the people between the age groups of twenty to thirty-five years is meant for the select group and would lead to an entry in the guardian class. Higher education, in his scheme, would be equally accessible to members of both the sexes. However, this should not be construed as Plato’s espousal of women’s rights. Basically, he believed both men and women to be equally capable of serving the state. He did not want to deprive the state of half its work force by denying them the proper training or eligibility to the same offices as men.

Rhythm and harmony are to find a place in the soul through training in music. When a soul was trained this way, it would become noble and good, and could achieve true taste. Music had the capacity to train the mind directly, temper and amend the elements of spirit, and harness the power of reason. Even though music could not give scientific knowledge, it could still help one develop right opinion. About the role Plato expects education to play, Ernest Barker observes that “It is meant to habituate the young soul, which is still in the state of feeling, to feel as it should about such problems as it has to solve, and in the strength of a feeling ingrained by habit to do as it ought to do, without knowing the why and wherefore of its action.”⁵ That is why Plato feels that special care should be taken to regulate music, as it creates a lasting impression on the soul. Gymnastics include not just diet and exercises and care of the body, but Plato sees it as the general science of health keeping. Gymnastics is the training of the body just as music is the training of the mind. However, Plato gives definite preference to improvement of the mind. For him, the training of the body through gymnastics is necessary because a trained body can serve the mind better. One can develop the qualities of courage and endurance through gymnastics, and this would lead to due tempering of the element of spirit.

This education carries on to the age of twenty. Education hereon moves to a higher level. Those who are not gifted enough to continue any further due to limitations of their learning faculties cannot be educated any further and must drop out of the programme. People can only take in as much as their capacities allow them to. At every stage of education, students are observed strictly and put through an examination and those who are found to be deserving of further education are allowed to proceed to the next level. In the elementary stage itself, Plato prescribed geometry and arithmetic as a sort of amusement so that the aptitude of students could be judged at an early age only. In the higher level, the medium of instruction changes from that of art to science and dialectic.

In the ancient times, the Greeks held science of mathematics in the highest regard. In keeping with this tradition, Plato emphasized the necessity of mathematics for all higher studies as he saw it as a way for opening the closed doors of reality. One had to be well versed in the knowledge of geometry to even wish for philosophical studies. He believed that truth could not be learned from sensible particulars, as these were nothing more than the shadows of the Universals. R. Pandey clarifies that Plato was so emphatic about the science of mathematics because he felt that "Reality could not be seen; it has to be thought...It is the condition, therefore, of knowledge or the attainment of reality that we should transcend sense-perception and rise above sensible particulars."⁶ Plato considered the study of the abstract very important, as it would ultimately lead to the realization of truth. So, he also prescribed the study of astronomy and harmonics.

The function of science ends when all truths of facts are transformed into truths of value or reason, and this is where the dialectic comes in. Dialectic synthesizes all previously acquired knowledge in consonance with the whole reality. That is the reason for which Plato treats dialectic indispensable during higher education. Without training in the dialectic, a person would not be qualified for being a guardian, which entails the responsibility to handle the state. It gives a person the capacity to rise above the mere sensual and view the ultimate reality in its abstract form. This is the culmination of Plato's theory of education.

Education should be a harmonious development of mind, body, and spirit: Gandhi

In Gandhi we find a unique blend of a revolutionary and an educationist. He had the ability to dream of the highest ideals while still having his feet firmly planted in reality. For him an ideal society was one where the community lived in harmony, where existence was not based on cold and heartless competition but on co-operation and mutual help, and where the quest for spiritual replaced the quest for material. Usha Mehta comments that "Education is looked upon by Gandhiji as an instrument for the establishment of such an ideal society and the imparting of a new kind of citizenship that would bring about the silent social revolution."⁷ Gandhi wanted to establish a new social order through his innovative scheme of education. His philosophy of education is a blend of his theory and practice. He believed in experimenting with new ways of educating the young minds. In all his educational experiments, his objective was to translate all his thoughts including that of education into actual practice. In his educational system was embedded a great political philosophy, that of evolution and establishment of an ideal society. This dynamic aspect of his philosophy earned him the status of a revolutionary.

The etymological meaning of the word 'education' is 'drawing out'. Its Gujarati equivalent *kelavani* also carries the same meaning. Taking note of this, Gandhi understood education to mean an undertaking of an endeavor to develop our latent faculties. However human beings have not one but many latent faculties which are usually classified into three broad groups – the mind, the body, and the spirit. Ajit K. Dasgupta believes, "Gandhi's understanding of what education is about is linked to his world outlook, which regards life as a quest for self-realisation."⁸ According to Gandhi education should make possible the maximum development of all three i.e., education should lead to an all-round development of human beings and therefore Gandhi advocates for cohesive and simultaneous education of mind, body, and spirit.⁹ He believed that concentrating on any one out of the three basic human faculties in any educational system would lead to an imbalance. He further adds, "Man is neither mere intellect, nor the gross animal body, nor the heart or soul alone. A proper harmonious combination of all the three is required for the making of the whole man and constitutes the true economics of education."¹⁰ He believed that such an over-all development of an individual would help achieve the social aims of education such as making democracy work or contributing to gainful employment.

For Gandhi, education beginning from childhood itself should not become a mere means to transfer a given store of knowledge to passive recipients; it should rather strive to be an active process of self-development. As KD Gangrade puts it, the goal of education lies not only in shaping the individual and social institutions, but "The assumption is that good education and teaching result in high standard of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. The motto of every educational institution has to be the achievement of learning and ennoblement of life."¹¹ Real education signifies a process in which mind, body and spirit would be trained in a synchronized way to lead to a life in which an individual can be a useful member of society, be capable of fighting against injustice imposed on him by external factors. That is why Gandhi was very much against mere literary knowledge. He claimed to attach far more importance to the cultural aspect of education than to its literary aspect. He believed that the then existing education system taught children only to cram and imitate and rendered them unfit for any originality in work and thought. Besides, such a system brought about a distance between a pupil's school and his socio-economic environment, including his home. Realizing the value of education extending beyond mere formal training, he feels that knowledge should not be necessarily linked to

personal growth and says, "That knowledge undoubtedly adds grace to life but it is in no way indispensable for man's moral, physical or material growth."¹² That is why Gandhi was not primarily interested in the problems of method and curricula.

Certain basic ideas are consistent throughout Gandhi's speech and writings. He had a vision of such a social order where each person would be a productive member, where each one's contribution which one would be made for the common good through co-operative endeavor. He wishes for education to give rise to that culture which would reject the long-standing dualism between theory and practice, between knowledge and action. R. S. Mani observes, "For Gandhi mere literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is only one of the means by which man and woman can be educated. Mere literacy, in his opinion, can never be the be-all and end-all of education."¹³ Therefore, he wanted education to break free of the mold into which it had set and take a new direction. For nearly forty years of his life, he conducted different kinds of experiments and had a variety of experiences. Through the culmination of the wisdom of these experiments he arrived at his philosophy of education. Gandhi's proposed programme of education for school children was known as *Nayee Talim* (New Education). It was also popularly known as Basic Education. Certain features, which he found to be fundamental for basic education, are:

- a) It would be given totally through the mother tongue.
- b) It would have vocational instead of literary orientation.
- c) It would be financially self-supporting.
- d) It would not incorporate sectional religious training. In it fundamental universal ethics would be given full scope.
- e) It would be made compulsory for students to also learn an inter-provincial language.
- f) It would be free and compulsory for one and all.
- g) It would extend for at least seven years.

Being a practical person himself, Gandhi saw education not in terms of merely acquiring knowledge or storing facts but in terms of experience and activity. Therefore, the thrust of his ideas lies in his attitude towards learning through crafts. By making education craft-centered, he wanted to emphasize on the dignity of labor and ensure modest and honest livelihood. He wanted all syllabi to revolve around vocational training. He condemned such education that stimulated neither initiative nor skill in production as it was of no practical use. At the same time, he insisted on training of intellect as well as of heart. G. Ramachandran expresses Gandhi's insistence on the practical aspect of education as "Productive work is to be conceived more as an instrument of education than for productivity. Productivity in terms of economic value is only a necessary corollary. Care has, however, to be taken to ensure that productivity is not stressed at the cost of intellectual growth."¹⁴ This kind of a scheme has the advantage of saving the child from the boredom of pure academic and theoretical instruction. It achieves a balance between theory and practice. It not only promotes dignity of labor but also helps to break the barriers between manual workers and the rest of the society.

Gandhi believed that a complete personality contains several attitudes, aptitudes, and values. So, as Dhurjati Mukherjee understands, he would have wanted to incorporate in his proposed educational programme, respectful attitude to the dignity of manual work, meaningful programmes of community services, moral and spiritual outlook towards all other humans.¹⁵ Even though Gandhi had no formal knowledge of the different theories of education, yet he was so advanced in his ideas that some of his ideas bear a striking similarity with modern educational theorists like Dewey. He was able to envision the importance of vocational education way ahead of his times and we can see a trend towards the same thought emerging in society today. For Gandhi, ideal of education was moral as well as social, and KG Saiyadeen appreciated Gandhi's ideas because while being indigenous, it had great universal appeal.¹⁶

Conclusion

Certain similarities immediately come to our notice when we compare these theories of education. First and foremost, Plato and Gandhi believe that education does not consist in mere literacy. They treat character building to be an essential aspect of education. They all would consider education to be of no use unless it assisted in the enrichment of the soul or the self. Each of them treats education to be so vital to the society that they each advocate that education should be compulsory and state controlled. And they all take care that access to education is free of any discrimination.

Education has a deep impact on human resources in the sense that education, much like training or information assists in the formation of capacities. It is important to formulate such policies that further human efficiency since they are also commonly used to limit inequality. Kolm aptly says, "Furthermore, education, training, or care are the essential tools of compensation when general material compensations are felt to be inadequate for differences in human capacities...."¹⁷

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