

Education and Svaraj in a Time of Svarth¹

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There was a time not so long ago when education, as a calling and mission, provided inspiration and hope alike to teachers and parents, administrators and thinkers. Today, even as the advocacy for schooling reaches a feverish pitch in campaign headlines, there are serious doubts whether its promises can be fulfilled and claims justified. The damage wrought by the successes and failures of the educational system is becoming manifest in the deterioration of the human condition. The great hope at the beginning of the 20th century about education as the harbinger of democracy (John Dewey) and a bulwark against catastrophe (H.G. Wells) has been belied by the tragic situations of contemporary civilization and of the earth's natural endowment at the end of the century. It is important to recall the critiques of schooling that emerged alongside the campus revolts of the 1960s, pointing to its dehumanizing, domesticating and spirit-breaking character. These culminated in the call for 'deschooling society,' which has hitherto remained unheeded.

New developments in the science of human information and communication technology, funded by commercial corporate and defence establishments, have opened up fresh avenues for the control of human learning and human beings. These not only influence educational content and practice, but they extend the scope of education beyond the institution of schools. More significantly, they dramatically enhance the role of mass media as a means of shaping social, economic and political behavior. The media and schooling systems have become increasingly captive to the engines of global political economy, fueled by the impulses of unlimited and unrestrained greed.

In the Indian context, issues around the purpose, quality and scope of education have been the concerns of social, intellectual and political leadership from the time of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lord Macaulay, if not earlier. The cultural self-awakening and the political revolt of the mid-19th century grew into the *Svaraj* movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The variants of *Svaraj* in different regions found their own cultural and educational expressions. In epochal and civilizational terms, the most radical debate (*vad-vivad*), self-recovery and commitment to liberation and transformation was posited in the book *Hind Svaraj* by Gandhiji. It took nearly three decades of mass political struggles and constructive work, based on the principles of truth and non-violence (in themselves powerful modes of learning), before the formal/institutional educational dimensions of Gandhian *Svaraj* could be articulated by Gandhiji himself in 1937.

In the decade before Independence, a determined effort was made by some of Gandhiji's followers to work out the curricular and systemic implications of *Nai Talim* (or New Education). Beginnings were also made to put this into practice in various settings. After Independence, some attempt was made to shape the national and state educational policy and practice along the patterns of *Nai Talim*. This proved still-born because it was carried

out half-heartedly, poorly understood, and not in accord with the mood and the aspirations of the modern educated elite, who had taken over the reins of power. The existing colonial system was maintained and expanded manifold, despite its oft-recognized flaws and incongruence vis-a-vis Indian values, visions of the freedom struggle, and the guiding principles of the Constitution. Rather than addressing and generating new education and development thrusts, emanating from the vast existing spiritual, cultural, economic and institutional capacities of the Indian people, the System deliberately devalued and marginalized these inherent capacities and took the available Western models and modes of social and scientific knowledge, technology, extension, communication and management as its preferred options. Today, at the turn of another century, the Indian system of education, like its economy and polity, finds itself increasingly at the mercy of forces of globalization and further away from the ideals of *Svaraj*.

Given this dismal scenario, how can one maintain faith and confidence in education and learning? This question is especially difficult for educators, who have prided themselves on being the vessels and vehicles of knowledge and enlightenment, the necessary means of progress, and who have devised elaborate and sophisticated systems, in collaboration with the rulers, to achieve their objectives. Be as that may, education and learning are too important to be left only to 'professional educators'. As personal and societal capabilities, learning and education have generative and systemic aspects, with primacy allotted to the generative aspect. Learning goes on organically, sensually, imaginatively, intellectually and spiritually, at conscious and unconscious levels. Education involves both learning and teaching, formally or informally, with or without aids. The purpose of education and learning is linked to the purpose of human existence which, at its best, has been defined as becoming more human or becoming divine. Since the extant systems have patently failed in fulfilling this promise, learning and education for enabling human beings to become more human/divine cannot be left to these systems, whether they be formal or non-formal.

Beyond the ivory towers and groves of academia, and the captive domains of educational planners and media Moghuls, there stands the self of each person — in face-to-face living and working relationships, in local village/neighbourhood communities with their own cultures/traditions, but linked also to the wider 'oceanic circles' of humanity, nature and divinity. This self *in loco communitas* refers to the 'sva' (self) of *svadhyaya* (self-learning, self-knowing), *svadharma* (self's vocation/calling/genius), *svadeshi* (place of one's belonging and caring), and *svaraj* (one's sense of societal/political responsibility). Beyond these, there is the self in the all-pervasive Self, the *Atman* in the *Parmataman*. Learning functions — personal, interpersonal and collective — derive from each of these dimensions.

The essential defining and pursuing of these learning dimensions has to be undertaken by all those who still care and would like to dis-engage from their present systemic captivity and re-engage in regenerative action. It is with this perspective that learning and education through nature, work, service in society, art and culture, traditional knowledge and wisdom, spirituality, and human-scale and ecologically-sound science and

technology must be revitalized. Only then can learning and education become personally meaningful, socially valued and relevant to the challenges of our troubled epoch. This understanding is what was behind Gandhiji's pithy declaration that "My Life is My Message," and what perhaps remains the only effective counter to the rampant and proliferating Empire of the 'Medium as the Message' (and one could add, the 'Medium as the Massage') that is currently shaping human behavior.

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1 *Svaraj* can be translated as 'self-rule' or 'rule over the self'; *Svarth* can be translated as 'selfishness'.