

Unity in divergence of Ancient Indian Educational Thoughts

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Abstract

This paper attempts to focus on the latent underlying unity in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Atmavidya introspective approach, pursuit of Truth, non-attachment has a profound influence upon ancient Indian education. The entire system of education laid stress on the practice of moral virtues and acquiring self-knowledge through the inculcation of good conduct. The role of the Guru and a meditative life is of paramount importance.

Keywords: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, unity

In ancient India, philosophy, education and religion are intertwined and give rise to a pattern of thought which can be enunciated as the 'system of Indian thought.' They all aim to further right living.

The special characteristic of Indian philosophy is that though its different schools express a diversity of views, yet they all present a mark of unity within them. This unity is due to their moral and spiritual outlook. All the systems of thought regard philosophy as a practical necessity and cultivate it in order to understand how life can be best led. In this paper the fusion of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism have been emphasized.

The difference between Western and Indian philosophy is that whereas in the former one finds different schools coming into existence successively, each school becoming prominent and succeeded by another one in the latter on the other hand, though different schools did not evolve simultaneously, they all thrived together for many centuries and followed parallel courses of growth. The primary reason for such a state of affairs rested upon the fact that in India, philosophy was a part of life. Once a system developed, it was practically

adopted as a way of life by a group of followers who formed a school of that philosophy. They actually lived the philosophy and passed on to coming generations of followers. Thus the systems prevailed with unbroken chains of successive believers spread over a long period of time.

Atmavidya or philosophy of the self, introspective approach and attitude to reality is the basic feature of both the Indian philosophy and the Indian philosophy of education. To know Truth is not enough. One must realize Truth. The doctrine of non-attachment and the synthetic approach of giving importance to authority and tradition have been emphasized.

Religion in India is a comprehensive notion. It determines the course of economic life, the democratic outlook and the worth of personality, man's outlook on culture and material needs. Even literature is influenced by the spirit of religion. Religion acts as a regulator of all social activities. Religion in ancient India encompasses all fundamental and natural modes and forms of human association. Religion dictates the course of evolution. It is a means to achieve salvation or self-realization. This religious outlook flows through education and learning. As per Radha Kumud Mookerji, "Nowhere is this distinctive tendency of Hindu thought more manifest than in the sphere of learning and education. Learning in India through the ages had to be prized and pursued not for its own sake, if we may so put it, but for the sake and as a part of religion."¹

Education in ancient India results from the concept that life continues with all its variations until death. The concept of death and its relationship to other things in the universe is central in understanding this philosophy behind Indian education. One must understand that an individual during his life-time has to appreciate certain values which pertain to life. Without a thorough understanding of the meaning of life and values and culmination in death the individual tends to isolate himself from the rules of life and universe in the pursuit of worldly or objective gains. This forms the key to the understanding of ancient Indian education.

Knowledge of the whole scheme of creation is not revealed by mere bodily senses. Mental life is not totally dependent on cerebral mechanism. Mind

is the instrument of knowledge and denotes the creative principle of man's culture and civilization. Filling the mind with objective knowledge is discouraged. The method of Yoga or Chitta Vritti Nirodha or science and art of Self by meditation and discipline is required to go into the innermost depths. 'Education must aid in this self-fulfillment, and not in the acquisition of mere objective knowledge.'² Knowledge is the 'third eye' and enables man to get an insight into all affairs and teaches him how to act. According to Altekar, 'Body, mind, intellect and spirit constitute a human being; the aims and ideals of ancient Indian education were to promote their simultaneous and harmonious development. Men are social beings. Ancient Indian education not only emphasized social duties but also promoted social happiness. No nation can be called educated which cannot preserve and expand its cultural heritage. Our education enabled us to do this for several centuries.'³ Also, the doctrine of transmigration of souls and of Karma or action have a deep impact upon Indian education.

The individual occupies a key position in educational practice. Every individual's own equipment of emotions, action-attitudes and ways of thinking are fully recognized. The Guru or the teacher acts as 'a great personality incarnating morality' and serves as a constant stimulus to the ideals to which a pupil is dedicated. The forest is the fountain-head of civilization.

The educational importance of Upanishads can never be undermined. Upanishads played an important role in the development of spiritual ideas in ancient India, marking a transaction from Vedic ritualism to new ideas and institutions. The Upanishads contain some of the central philosophical concepts and ideas of Hinduism. The Upanishads emphasize the two-fold path in man's life—the path of Preyas i.e. worldly life, pleasure and prosperity to be achieved by Karma and Dharma, deeds and rituals and the path of Sreyas i.e. the sole and Ultimate Reality or the everlasting good to be achieved in a life of sustained and strenuous meditation on the Atman. The Upanishads deal with different branches of knowledge, arts and science, and also speak of the supreme or highest knowledge.

The Buddhist philosophy of education also talks of the same meditative and sage life. Infact with the advent of Buddhism, two ascetic orders—one Brahmana and the other Shramana prevailed. These shramans like the Greek Sophists use to preach education among the masses through debate and various techniques. To hold the view that Buddhism rises as a revolt against the caste system of Brahmanism is to completely misunderstand the very mission of Buddhism. Although the Buddha is fond of attacking the mere Brahmanhood of birth and insisted on the Brahmanhood of virtue, yet the idea of being a social reformer never enters his mind or into his schemes.⁴ The Buddha does not think about economics, society or politics but he thinks about religion and spiritualism. Brahmacharya in Hinduism means "the practice (Charya) of Brahma (Veda)". The teacher is known as Archarya "he who practices the precepts of religion". Buddhist education laid stress on the pursuit of Truth and the practice of moral virtues and the training of the will. A man must have self-knowledge. This self-knowledge may be acquired by inculcating good conduct.

The entire system of Indian education, whether Brahmanical or Buddhist, was based upon the principle of a personal touch or relationship between the teacher and the taught, whether the sphere of its working lay in the individual household of the teacher or in the collective establishment of a monastery. Both the domestic and monastic systems of education worked upon the basis of a common pedagogical principle, though they differed as regards the manner of its application as determined by their respective backgrounds or environments.⁵

There is a synthesis of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain culture in the Jain Philosophy of Education. In the Jain system of education, there is no place for external objects. Here, man has to concentrate upon himself for his salvation. Jainism is concerned with the principle of knowledge — 'knowledge through sense-perception, scriptures, clairvoyance, telepathy and lastly perfect omniscience or knowledge par excellence.'⁶ He who can centre round his mind within himself is capable of attaining communion with the Supreme Self. In Jainism, real thought and behaviour direct human beings to follow infinite consciousness and energy and divine bliss. Divine spark is within man. The

meaning of Jain education is self-dependence. This ideal of self-dependence has been preached by the Jains everywhere—far and near.

With what has been discussed above it becomes apparent that in the educational systems of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism there is an underlying unity of the thought process and this is manifest from the philosophies of each one of them. The percolation of this unity is seen in their educational systems and these have been highlighted in the paper. In conclusion, it may be said that the legacy of unity in diversity of thoughts is even more relevant today. Incomplete understanding of the fact, that such a link exists which brings together thoughts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism have been responsible for considering that these three religions are radically different in their philosophy and propagation. This paper carries a message emphasizing the underlying unity.

References

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