
Good Old Ways of Learning

Dr. Pragya Shukla

Assistant Professor, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Central University of Chhattisgarh

Earlier it was understood that knowledge has to be acquired by investing time and devotion. People delved deep into books and knowing that what they knew already was only the tip of an iceberg and there was much to be learned. Newton, who gave to the world the atomic structure of matter, the quantum theory and discoveries of the universe made by giant telescopes, space probes, and many more. It is said that the great scientist, just before dying had remarked:

I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Newton, however, was a great man, endowed with humility that follows true learning. Present day learners are happy with bits and snatches they manage to grab amidst their fun and frolic.

Some are self learners, while some others need to be educated. Education is of utmost significance in modern times. It differentiates a savage from a civilized being. It transforms individuals into rational beings. In the past, learning was encouraged so as to aid in imbibing an ideal behaviour. Knowledge, it was believed imparted depth to personality. Slowly the meaning of education assumed renewed significance.

Since education is a progressive evolutionary process, it is imperative, therefore, that the structure imparting education be updated and modified to keep up with the demands of the changing times. The progressive evolutionary process of education needs to be relevant to humanity and the prevailing human conditions. Hence before laying down the philosophy or the framework of imparting knowledge, the educationists carry out an in depth analysis of existing conditions and capacity of the coming generation.

In the modern times of technological advancement, with waves of information surging all around, a learner realises that learning is akin to entering into the world of knowledge. He has to be taught to develop clarity and make sincere efforts to imbibe relevant knowledge in a specified field—knowledge that assists in grabbing a good job in the job market.

Sadly enough, knowledge in modern times is pursued solely for the purpose of getting hold of a means of livelihood. Education is now confined to half hearted book learning and award of degrees. Khalil Gibran had aptly remarked once:

...knowledge, the object of knowledge and application of the knowledge—all the three are equally important for motivating to take a wise action. A little knowledge that acts is worth more than much knowledge that is inactive. One,

whose knowledge is confined to books, cannot use his wealth of knowledge, whenever required.

The impact of learning is not limited to literacy and learning. It stretches its arms to embrace observation, thought patterns, habits, manners, character, attitude and aptitude. A sound system of education teaches individuals to control their senses, mind and intellect.

Once Narada, the great sage, requested Sanatkumar to teach. The Master questioned thus:

‘What do you already know?’

Narada answered: I am master of every art, every science, known or unknown, in earth and heaven, but Bhagwan, I do not know myself. Teach me.

The Great Master said, “All this learning is only descriptive, informative, a veneer, a name – just a word only. You have not touched the substance of things. Informative knowledge of a thing is not equal to possession of that thing’

A lot of debate has ensued over the question of educating pupils in preschool, kindergarten and the early grades. Experts in primary education endorse the notion of ‘developmentally appropriate practice’. In India, the prevalent chaos regarding education system should come as a surprise because India has a rich tradition of learning and education. The entire world reveres our ancient system of education and has tried to emulate it innumerable times.

Our Shastras and Sutras discuss the duty of a teacher and pupil in detail. They emphasize on learning for self fulfillment and not merely for acquisition of objective knowledge. From the Vedic age onwards, it has been believed that education is a source of illumination, lighting up all spheres of life. It led, it was to emancipation too. Wise sages preached that an appropriate training of the mind and a positive thinking pattern were the right blend for an avid learner. In ancient times, pupils educated themselves for their own mental growth. The Katha Upanishad lays down:

He, who is possessed of supreme knowledge by concentration of mind, must have his senses under control, like spirited steeds controlled by a charioteer.

In an intellectual discourse in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Janaka, the king of Videha asked:

....What radiance or light aids men in performance of actions?’asked Janaka

‘The radiance of the Sun’, replied Yajnavalkya. ‘It is through the light of the Sun that men walk and act.’

‘When the Sun has set what radiance is it that helps men?’ asked Janaka. ‘It is through the light of the moon that aids men to walk and act’.

‘When the sun and the moon have set and are not visible what radiance is it that aids men?’asked Janaka.

‘The radiance of fire’, replied Yajnavalkya. ‘It is through the light of the fire that men sit, walk and act.’

‘When the Sun and moon have set and the fire is out, what radiance is it that aids men?’ asked Janaka.

‘The radiance of sound/speech’, replied Yajnavalkya. ‘Even if there is no light, it is through speech and sound that men sit, walk and act.’

‘When the sun and moon have set and the fire is out and there is no articulation of speech what radiance is it that aids men? asked Janaka.

‘The radiance of the soul. The light of knowledge.’ replied Yajnavalkya, ‘it is through the light of knowledge, intelligence and wisdom of the soul that men sit, walk and act.’

Hence it becomes clear from the philosophical discourse that knowledge is responsible for the advancement of individuals.

The conversation between Janaka and Yajnavalkya makes it clear that knowledge is all powerful. It enables men to rule over the universe and occupy the topmost rung in the process of evolution. Indian culture and Indian tradition has always emphasised upon the wealth of knowledge.

With the passage of time, however, concepts and opinions underwent a change. Spiritualism took a back seat and materialism took control of the steering wheel. This transformation has been beautifully captivated by Albert Einstein:

...Our whole education suffers from this evil...an exaggerated competitive attitude is inculcated into the student, who is trained to worship acquisitive success as a preparation for his future career. I am convinced there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils...The education of the individual, in addition to promoting his own innate abilities, would attempt to develop in him a sense of responsibility for his fellow – men in place of the glorification of power and success in our present society.(Einstein)

In order to educate, we must catch them ‘young’. When children are below the age of five, the doors that lead to an unlimited expanse of learning must be opened to them. Just as saplings of rice are first nurtured in a nursery, young children need to attend a pre-school before they attend a proper school for ‘big children’. In a pre-school, students are should be groomed in a positive atmosphere. They should be appreciated for good habits and a teacher might exhibit disapproval by a loving embrace and then sending the message across.

Early childhood education should be infused with words of love, encouragement, motivation and appreciation.

A fact that is agreed upon by most educationists is that curiosity survives formal education. Formal education stimulates and inspires. Its impact is life -long. It acts as a catalyst in the young learner’s mind, pushing pupils to absorb and explore. An effort should be made to inculcate the yearning to learn more in young minds. They have to be encouraged to ask questions to quench their curiosity. Instead of teaching the little to answer question in a proper format, they must be pushed to learn more and question more.

Education system has evolved radically over the past few decades. It is more need based instead of following a strict regime. Long back W.B.Yeats had remarked:

Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.

Formal education is similar to a flame and curiosity is the fuel. The poet was probably pointing to the fact that college instruction did not mean scattering grains of wisdom for students to collect. It was more akin to gathering kindle wood, allowing students to play with matches so that in the process some wood may catch fire and burst out into hungry flames and become lifelong interests.

A fact that is agreed upon by most educationists is that curiosity survives formal education. Formal education stimulates and inspires. Its impact is lifelong. It acts as a catalyst in the young learner's mind, pushing pupils to absorb and explore. The exaggerated competitive attitude should not be encouraged beyond a certain limit. The whole idea of education should be to ignite the candle called 'interest' so that its hungry, licking flames make clearly visible the path that leads to a world of immense knowledge. The student must then be motivated, lovingly, to embark upon the long never ending journey of learning.

According to Delors' Commission (1996), education must be organized around four fundamental types of learning which in a way will be a pillar of knowledge throughout a person's life such as learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. The concept underlying this view has commonality with the true meaning of '*Vidya*', which is also to be, to know, to feel and discriminate. (Faure et al. 1972).

Latest research concludes that the first 2000 days in a child's life are crucial. A child is born with billions of brain cells and they eventually die away if not properly put to use.

Mahatma Gandhi occupies an eminent position amongst prominent educators. He believed education to be a continual process of growth and development. His views on education were similar to those of our wise ancestors. To him development of the inner spirit was far more significant than mere rules and methods. Spiritual and physical training of a student, in his opinion, were an inseparable part of education:

By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man – body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated. Literacy in itself is no education. I would therefore begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training. Thus every school can be made self supporting, the condition being that the State takes over the manufactures of this school. (M.K. Gandhi: *Harijan*, 31 July 1937)

Mahatma Gandhi appreciated how the educators of the western countries had emulated the Indian system of education and had become flourishing educationist. They respected their teachers. They understood that education meant not mere literacy but imbibing lessons from all people and things around. The Indians had forgotten it all. They had forgotten that the most important lessons could be learned from humanity. The primary function of teachers was not to teach letters, numbers and alphabet but to preach humanity. Aristotle held similar views. He speculated that virtue could be learnt not by reading of volumes but by performing noble deeds. A nation that that considers education to be so noble becomes prosperous:

Parents should provide for excellent education, teachers should discharge their responsibility and pupils should recognize that mere literacy is not education. (Indian Opinion, 18th May 1907(CW6, pp.484-85)

Mahatma Gandhi read Emerson, Ruskin and Mazzini. He delved deep into the *Upanishads*. After his reading sessions, he concluded:

All conform to the view that education does not mean knowledge of letters but it means character building, it means knowledge of duty. Our own word literally means ‘training’. If this be the true view and it is to my mind the only true view, you are receiving the best education—training—possible. (Letter to Manilal Gandhi, 25th March 1909(CW9, p.208)

All Holy Scriptures lay down that we should take care of the sick and the needy. Gandhiji believed that an individual endowed with right education will always be inclined to lend a helping hand. They will do this without an ounce of superiority complex. He believed that an individual received blessings of the Almighty on serving those ailing. Religious obligations of individuals are fulfilled on nursing a sick.

Bapu’s views on education was result based. If education evolved an individual into a better human being, it was effective. His idea becomes clear from a letter that he had written to his son:

...I am not worried about your bookish learning so long as you perform your duties and observe solemn ethical conduct. For me, carrying out the fundamentals of ethics is duty. I shall support you if you want to study further out of your love for it or for excellence. But I won’t scold you if you do not do it. Try your best to carry out the decisions you have made. (Letter to Ramdas Gandhi (*The Making of Mahatma*, p.97)

The achievements of his children did not please him as much as their acts of nobility. He always said that quality education gave way to nobility. Mahatma Gandhi often interacted with students around the country; Gandhiji’s views regarding education became all the more firm. Packing the brain with facts and figures to pass an examination did nothing for development of character. People belonging to different streams might argue that the study of their subject is true education. The Mahatma opined thus:

...every branch of knowledge should have as its goal knowledge of the self... in an activity carried on as education, proper understanding of its meaning, devotion to duty and the spirit of service are necessary. (10th July 1932(CW50, p.182).

Mahatma Gandhi wished to usher in transformations. He was a humanist and firmly believed that pure hearted individuals came together to construct a good society. He was a humanist, from the first moment of his self consciousness. He considered man to be the harbinger of peace and harmony. He opined:

Man is neither mere intellect, nor the gross animal body, nor the heart or soul alone. A proper and harmonious combination of all three is required for

making of the whole man and constitutes the true economics of education.
(Singh: 9)

For the father of our nation, education was a comprehensive concept. It went much deeper than its literal meaning:

By education I mean an all round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education not even the beginning. It is one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated. Literacy in itself is no education.’

Gandhiji held a modern outlook towards education. He mulled over issues that are being discussed in the 21st century. He understood that mere education would not suffice. It should lead to socio-economic development. He vouched for a system that stimulated the human mind for creative thinking or dignity of manual labor. He insisted that individuals endowed with creativity should join the teaching force.

The Kothari Commission was an ad hoc commission instituted by the Government of India to examine and evolve guidelines for the development of education in India. The commission adopted the Gandhian principle of learning:

We recommend that work experience should be introduced as an integral part of all India education—general or vocational. We define work experience as participation in productive work in school, in the home, in a workshop, on a farm, in a factory or in any other productive situation.

The Commission laid down that a common public education system be initiated and vocationalised. It emphasised on the need to make work experience and social service an inseparable part of education. It also gave its assent to the Gandhian principle of learning by doing.

True education leads to physical, spiritual and mental growth. Education ushers in feelings of love, sympathy and brotherhood in a learner’s heart. It inspires learners to understand and carry out their responsibilities. Discipline is the most important ingredient of modern education:

All your scholarship, all your study of Shakespeare and Wordsworth would be vain if at the same time you do not build your character, and attain mastery over your thoughts and actions. When you have attained self mastery and learnt to control your passions you will not utter notes of despair. (Speech to Students, Agra, 19th September 1929(CW 41, p.391)

Earlier it was believed that the three Rs were the basics of education—reading, riting and rithmetic. In the process of driving these concepts home, the educators failed to teach the true basics of how to study and learn. Students failed to become self-learners.Gandhiji elaborated:

...although much good and useful work can be done without a knowledge of the three R's, it is my firm belief that we cannot always do without such knowledge. It develops and sharpens one's intellect, and it increases our capacity of doing well. I have never placed an unnecessarily high value on the knowledge of the three R's. I am only attempting to assign its proper place to it. Again, the true knowledge of self is unattainable by the millions who lack such education. Many a book is full of pleasure, and this will be denied to us without education. It is no exaggeration to say that a human being without education is not far removed from an animal. Education therefore is necessary. (Speech at Bhagini Samaj, Bombay, 20th February, 1918.

The most significant goal of education is character building which leads to the flowering of personality and growth of feelings of compassion, kindness, fair mindedness and loyalty. Bapu maintained:

...In brief, formation of character should have priority over knowledge of the alphabet. If this order is reversed, the attempt would be like putting the cart before the horse and making it push the cart with its nose, and would meet with the same success as the latter course.

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of education is relevant in the contemporary times. His construct of education system inspired learning, personality growth, development of the culture of peace. His concept of true education rested on the belief of preparing noble, ethical /and morally strong individuals. Gandhiji's concept of education is replete with religious ideas. that his concept of education has full of religious ideas. His idea of religion is different from common concept. His concept of religion is 'service of humanity'. For the spirit of religions he propounded 'Nai Talim' or 'basic education'. We can safely conclude that Gandhiji's concept of education aspired to eliminate illiteracy and instil the concept of learning by doing. His education system laid an emphasis on the culture of peace, sincere work, loyal to the nation, social minded, friendliness, right feelings, economic advancement, physical improvement and socio-cultural progress. Economic self-sufficiency and self-reliance was keenly sought.

When we look back to seek answers from our ancestors, they show us a path that is simple and uncomplicated. They believed that education should impart wisdom as well as virtue. Teachers of yore read out the lessons to their students. Apart from text learning, they kept an avid eye on each one of them. Students bloomed under the personal supervision of teachers. The teachers ensured intellectual progress and moral behaviour of his disciples. It was believed that good character cannot be divorced from good manners. Devoted and focussed gaze of a teacher was effective in imparting education. Students offered their prayers regularly and examples of national heroes and heroines were narrated amidst lessons which helped in moulding their personalities.

Students of present times should be taught the significance of self restraint. Those who truly aspire to grow into lifelong learners must take simplicity's refuge. Materialism might give them momentary pleasures but it leaves behind an emptiness that only knowledge can dispel.

A simple meal, simple clothing, meaningful recreation and a life of chastity will help him to achieve success.

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