

Mahadevi Verma on Education

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Mahadevi Verma became famous as a poet. But in fact she had devoted a greater part of her life to education and teaching. She had established the famous Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth. Dedicating herself to education was her conscious decision. She believed that educational institutions build the nation. She held the view that a student ought to be a thinking person and in case he/she has closed the doors of his heart and mind.

There are many definitions of *Vidya* in Indian literature. Mahadevi liked this the most: *Sa Vidya Ya Vimuktye*, which means education is that which liberates. There are two aspects of education: internal essence and external component. The subject and its communication make the internal thing. The *Guru* (the teacher), the disciple, curriculum and surroundings make the external structure. All these five elements make the petals of the

lotus of education. They are tied together carefully by the language.

She considered education as the heart of the society. It sends new talents to all fields of a society like purified blood. If new blood sent by the field of education is healthy then the society will be healthy and active. But if germs of diseases enter into the life of nation, it would become fatally sick.

Ancient Indian thinkers had planned education very carefully. They believed that education is a field of dual development and it regulates a child's instincts and shapes up his/her humane potential. Therefore, neglecting education may take the society back to barbarism. Today many countries in the world seem to follow these thoughts.

Mahadevi was against drawing divisive line between tradition and modernity. She felt that we make a mistake by devaluing the great achievements of our past. "Only by

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incorporating the lines of tradition which carry the history of human progress in the new era, we add new links in the golden chain of development, and not by breaking with them.” The plants rooted in their own soil can tolerate hot or cold winds coming from any side. In her words, “If they leave the base of their soil, then neither the morning breeze, nor the divine rain can keep them alive.” The same thing was emphasised by Rabindranath Tagore, when he said, “that emancipation from the bondage of the soil is no freedom for the tree.”

It is true that everything in tradition is not necessarily good. Mahadevi was aware that India had passed through long periods of foreign subjugation. In such a condition preservation of culture was more urgent than choosing the valuable over the valueless. So sometimes “some precious element was lost and worthless got preserved”. Mahadevi Verma believed that this is not a matter of concern, because at the end only such values survive that prove its worth in new situations.

Mahadevi felt from experience that communication of knowledge is more difficult than collecting it. The field of education is also a mysterious laboratory. We should provide full opportunity for an independent development of a student’s inner world, his/her personality and also help to bind him harmoniously with the outer world. Indian thinkers always made

the objectives of education clearer by classifying *Vidya* into *Para* and *Apara*, so that it should be valuable in itself and also beneficial for others. *Para* is a medium of self enlightenment, while *Apara* is the means of its development in social circumstances.

The thoughts of Mahadevi on education are similar to the famous Russian writer and educationist Leo Tolstoy. Education is considered preparation of life only in a limited sense. In the broader sense, it is the continuous aim of life. Tolstoy said that there is no such thing as the final goal of education. It is the law of unending evolution that directs real education. So, by its very nature education of man never concludes.

These classical points about education should not be ignored. Otherwise a serious disruption takes place in society. If education is taken only as a means of worldly development, then its real meaning is lost. Such an education becomes a futile activity with a meaningless preparation for life. It results in producing social unrest in society. Therefore, considering education as only the means of personal prosperity is not only harmful for the society, but it ultimately makes a student a weak person without any real self-perception.

These were not idealist talking points for Mahadevi. She believed it to be the practical details about education. Ignoring it would create

concrete problems, whether we identify its reason or not. She observed, "From the beginning till the end, children are usually neither given moral education nor any attention to their character, which is why, we find only a few young men whose life contain the values of principles, courage, spirited bravery and sense of respect and reverence for women."

One fact which used to sadden Mahadevi again and again was that India had to face prolonged periods of defeat at the hands of foreigners. In her words, "this is an undisputed fact that a victor is never satisfied with just having the governing rights over a defeated country. He also wants cultural victory over the conquered." The most simple and sure medium for that is control over education. Therefore, the objectives of education in a country ruled by foreigners can't be the same as in a self-governed country.

It is sad that independent India's wise men could not grasp this point on education. What Mahadevi said was not new. Her observations on education are fully in accordance with great visionaries such as Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi. She asserted that a self-governed nation has to build its able heirs for its treasury of culture. The rulers of an enslaved country need only the helpers among the ruled, so that they could maintain the status quo. Therefore, the objectives of education for an

enslaved country and a free country become quite different.

For example, developing future citizens with qualities like self esteem, sense of national identity, will to struggle against injustice, etc. are useful only in a free country. Under foreign domination, such a development of new generation is 'more threatening than weapons' for the rulers. In India we have not changed the colonial education system. As a result our education is disturbed, uncertain and disruptive. Free country and colonial education are not consistent with each other. Therefore, Mahadevi thought, there is no way for us to move forward without solving this contradiction.

She also took note of the world scenario on education. She analysed the student unrest here and there. There are countries where the body of a citizen is free, but his soul is in chains. At some places the soul is free, but the body is in subjugation. The sphere of education is the centre of struggle at all places. Mahadevi felt that the new generation is restless. This restlessness is not due to lack of material comfort, as otherwise there should not have been student unrest in materially-rich country like the United States of America. Mahadevi thought the world has become unified due to the development of science. But political conflicts are multiplying divisions among people. This is a contradictory situation, which can be set right only by focusing on achieving

higher objectives of life.

In India the internal and external conditions of the students are very much disrupted. To infuse creativity in them is a tough task. The generation born in independent India has quite different hopes and ambitions. But the earlier generation has yet not got freedom from mental subjugation (she wrote all this some thirty years ago). This disorder has become a major obstacle in the full-fledged development of our young generation. Our students and educational scenario are in a peculiar condition. Everything is there—education, training and various modes of communication. But what could be the content of training young minds, we don't know yet, as it never belongs to a single book. It is in our scriptures, in our philosophy, in our dharma. In other words, it is in those things which we have decided to disregard completely.

Finding no means of livelihood after completing education is a cause of dissent amongst students. Instigation by political parties for their narrow purposes is also a reason. At the same time, change of values and beliefs is also disturbing the students. Without comprehending the goal of education they pass through schools, colleges and universities mechanically. They never know where they would land. Our education system does not pay attention to the varied available possibilities. Some fortunate ones get jobs, while others spend golden years of their youth in colleges and

universities wasting their precious time. But it seems nothing is being thought about this vital issue.

It is a shame for a free society that valuable years of its youth are being destroyed and it just looks on silently, unable to think of necessary corrective measures. We are witnessing it for decades in the hope of some hundreds or thousands of decent jobs; and millions of youth are engaged in a hopeless rat race. Having no solution for earning a livelihood even after completing education and being blamed by the society for this condition, the student community is confused.

If a student gets education compatible to his/her talent and suitable to his/her interest, he/she would get involved in political activity. If a student having an interest in science, art or literature finds his/her desired path for his/her creative talent, he/she would still consider entering into politics while as a student, this is a misuse of his/her time. Mahadevi also advised people active in politics not to use students as weapons in the broad interest of the society. "Sects of religion do not scare me, but sects of politics do," she said.

To Mahadevi the most difficult problem about education is related to its inner nature and its medium. Only the mother tongue can be the appropriate medium of education for any child. The language question is also concerned with culture and the sense of national identity, especially for a country like India which has been subjugated as a nation despite being

great in culture. Even in utility English proves to be an obstruction as most of the students fail in it.

Even those who pass in English neither comprehend any subject through it nor become able to express themselves fully. The situation remains the same today. Some people may get benefited from the predominance of English medium in our education system. But the inferiority complex and intellectual dumbness that develop in millions of otherwise very able youth of this country is never taken into account. Mahadevi reminds us that to cross through the dark ages of subjugation the vision of our great thinkers and seers kept the path visible from being lost in darkness and the language has been the flame of lamp for that light. *Pavaka nah Saraswati*.

Being a sensitive teacher Mahadevi felt that the desired development of a student becomes impossible due to the burden of English language. The reason is a deep relationship of language with human sensitivities. She said, "Nothing can be more miserable for a thinking person than his inability to express himself and when this state of mind gets reflected in activity, it can only produce destructive tendency." This conclusion, arrived at by her experience, was a warning too. Ignoring which we have not done the right thing. Mahadevi also tried to persuade intellectuals and educationists of our country who believed that certain colonial legacies cannot be done away

with. The educational framework given by the foreign rulers "has no strength to bestow humanism," she explained. Not only a foreign language has been the medium of our education for a long time, but it has become for some of us a proof of being erudite and highly cultured. Therefore, "it is no wonder if many of us shiver by the thought of living without it. As reminding always death as the ultimate fate of human beings, no treatment would seem necessary to an ailing person. So, to fulfill our national life the inner world of our nation must be made free. This work is hard and demands special efforts, as the chain binding the soul is stronger than the chains tying the body."

Mahadevi tried to make our intelligentsia understand that the problems faced by countries with ancient culture used to be very different. Those having a civilisation for a few centuries do not have much to lose or change. But the countries having very ancient culture risk great loss in any reckless change. In a misplaced enthusiasm for modernisation or radical transformation, if we lose some valuable heritage, it would be a great loss not only for the particular country but that of the entire humanity. So if a colonial legacy has become a fetter in the natural development of millions of Indians then saying it can't be helped is plain defeatism.

In the very inspiring words of Mahadevi, "A river that springs from the heart of the Himalayas, whether

a small current or a big one, does never ask for the way from the rocks. Has it ever asked to make banks of gold, silver or marble for it? It never said so. Crossing the mountains it moves on overtaking everything with a gusty speed and it is her principle to make her own banks.” Similarly, our thoughtful people must build the path on which our nation could come out of mental subjugation of centuries, not only an elite class, but every person of our country. This cannot be accomplished by imitating others’ medium and models. Therefore, the objective of our education system must be to make the natural relation with our culture lively. Only material and economic development cannot be the objective of education. If economic development could not be coordinated with the evolvement of the self, it would become an ugly phenomenon. “If someone asks you to give Ganga-Yamuna in exchange to take you on the Mars, you would never agree. There is a reason: we are made of this land, we have a soulful relation with it. You can harmonise its message with science, but cannot leave it for science.”

It would be fatal to make mere economic advancement as the sole goal of anyone’s education. That would end into a blind alley. It can be appreciated even by looking deeply into the situation of the so-called developed countries. That kind of selfish goal creates a ‘mental unemployment,’ Mahadevi pointed out. It is equally miserable as the unemployment

about livelihood. Moreover, what we call higher education, “transforms itself sometimes into absolute dissatisfaction with life and sometimes merely a means to get some necessary amenities for a comfortable living.”

She believed that Indian students have a great strength to face the challenges of present times. But for this to happen one should have self-control over one’s life. If our life is not disciplined, or if we do not lead a balanced life, we can’t get inner strength. Giving the example of electricity, Mahadevi explained that electricity is everywhere—in sky, on earth and in every atom. But you can’t light a single lamp from it. Light would not activate until it is collected first in a powerhouse, a centre, and then the whole city can be illuminated. “Similar process takes place in one’s heart. If you concentrate or focus and hold your full strength, physical power, inner power, faith, belief and the power of your soul and consider what strength you have, then all dark clouds would be scattered. All the obstacles coming in your way will be removed.” She believed, if students recognise their hidden strength, the disintegration of society would stop and social life would be free from all disparities. But if they fail to understand their duty, the whole country would become weak and lost.

Mahadevi was insightful about the role of creative literature in education. Usually literature is a small part of the study of languages and not an essential part of education in general. She was of the view that for every student, in

his/her education, literature must have a very important place. She considered it as 'a chemical capable to remove the discrepancies of life.' Reminding us that the command of armed force creates a relationship of a conqueror and the conquered between two countries, while the influence of literature always brings harmony between two countries. Therefore, "We have to give such importance to literature and culture in education, so that a student may get the message of unity, fraternity or brotherhood of human beings and ultimately would become a more complete man."

Her observations on the status of women and their education are of immense value. The great Hindi poet (*Mahapran*) Nirala wrote about Mahadevi, "Through her thousands of girls have been benefited and became dignified." In the field of education, "Mahadevi is greater than Sarojini Naidu. No doubt, her ideal in Hindi is greater than many great men" Mahadevi had studied thoroughly about the contribution of great women scholars of ancient India and emphasised on learning from them. She did research on the great tradition of women education and the high status of women as existed in our country. In the Indian tradition, "there has been co-education with common methods for teaching. On completion of study, women graduates were involved in teaching also." It continued till seventh to eighth century. Thereafter, during the

era of successive foreign rules, many things changed in our country. The situation of women was one of them.

To bring about the required transformation in the life of women was one of the main concerns of Mahadevi. To her the Indian women are presently the 'queen of the empire of ignorance.' On the other hand, education presently being given to them takes some good qualities away from many young women. "We can't say easily about a girl that she is an inquisitive student, because she comes out of her home like unrestrained butterflies far from the reality and sensitivity of life and does not mind to become the centre of attraction of others." Therefore, we may find qualities like simplicity, humbleness, etc. in illiterate women but the so-called literate women hardly get more than the ability to recognise letters and read some novels in exchange of giving up all her qualities. The main reason for this sorry state of imparting education needs a thorough relook.

If children learn under the guidance of persons who do not have a sound character and firm principles, carry inherent weakness out of their own poor education and character, all these weaknesses would also affect the students. Mahadevi felt sad about the fact that we do not care enough to have even rich qualities in our teachers.

"Those teachers responsible for building the future of girls, the mothers of coming generations; our lacklustre attitude towards them

is an unforgivable fault. To provide means and arrangement for country specific, society specific and culture specific mental development is the true education by which a person feels harmony in his/her life and makes it useful for others too. This important task is not such that can be performed by a person ignorant of a distinct culture, and frivolous and weak in character.”

Mahadevi was firm in her view that copying the western societies is harmful for the upliftment of women in India. Mechanical equality with men ultimately makes women more incapable and dependent. In any case, the educated men who are ‘weak, helpless and useless degree holders,’ should never be the ideals of women. Abandoning her natural qualities and only unsuccessfully imitating men can lead educated women nowhere. Whatever may appear on the surface, in fact such a woman loses social and personal values. So, if we follow such suicidal approaches of the western world, it would be as ridiculous as cutting one’s feet to copy a physically challenged person.

Because the western approaches are hedonistic, the relationships between men and women generally may not grow above such limitations, even though the social courtesies of the west may appear very praiseworthy. Therefore, according to Mahadevi, if our women follow the western model of freedom it will lead to other forms of distortions and abuses. It will not

move towards harmony which is the life of a society.

Mahadevi had also evaluated the Indian intellectual scenario. She noted that present education system, “is not a bridge to bring us nearer but has become a big gulf to divide us, which our selfishness is widening day by day.” This is an education after getting which we try to become a person, a common man feels hesitation to approach. It is natural, then, that this type of education transforms our intellectuals into a hi-fi set. They neither connect with Indian people, nor do the people feel comfortable to mix with them. Some intellectuals are such, “in whom education has turned into poison like the drops of *Swati (nakshatra)* becomes into the mouth of a snake.”

That is why the intellectuals, who consider themselves so very important, actually are extremely incapable of contributing to the country. Most of them live and grow in an inferiority complex. “Theirs is even totally a lame dream, just by attaching some foreign feathers, assumes to be some messenger of heaven. Even their most ugly ideals, because of being in a western mold, are identified as nothing other than the prettiest. Even their shoddiest views with some foreign patches here and there are taken to be the king of the whole thinking world.”

Women intellectuals are also the same. “As a pot of cold water lying nearby hot water loses its coolness unknowingly. In the similar way

educated women have silently adopted the weaknesses of men and they come to visualise their worse condition as the very sign of a great success.” That is why most of the women intellectuals also give more importance to meaningless mental exercises than the simple and truthful feelings of the people. They even take individual confusions as some valuable formulations; become devoted to publicise it and make selfish enterprises as their petty ‘knowledge business’.

Mahadevi observed sadly that in such intellectuals the outlines of culture and images of life are broken. She always tried to inspire us to be attached with our cultural roots, though with an independent mind. She wanted us to find our way in a new era. Her great contribution to education, culture and literature is comparable to any thinker of modern India. It is a pity our new generation of educationists know little about it. This only proves her observations accurate.