

# Education for a saner world

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LINKING arts and crafts to mainstream education is not impossible. To achieve this, what is required is political insight and a qualitative change in the adult mindset, a definitive shift. Our present educational system is far too dominated by left-brain subjects, primarily language, maths and science. The school timetable has little time for right-brain subjects – music, theatre, dance, the visual arts, craft among others. These are all treated as extracurricular, sort of postscripts. Education that concentrates mainly on half the brain is absurd, even dangerous.

Since we live in the information age, equal importance ought to be given to hands-on learning, book learning and e-learning. Tragically, only a negligible amount of time is available for outdoor and practical experiences. Striking a balance between inputs for both sides of the brain is vital.

The turning point in my life was my going to the National Institute of Design in the mid-seventies. Learning at NID was a rich smorgasbord of experiences. There was theory and practice, arts and sciences, in effect a healthy blend of inputs for the whole brain. Also we had the best of the East and the West, as well as an exposure to the old and the new. This balance helped in developing well-rounded individuals as opposed to highly specialized, blinkered people. We were assessed individually. There were no marks for our projects, so naturally there was little comparison. I often wished that these learning methods were prevalent in my childhood. School would have been fun.

My career has been twofold – first, practising professional design and second, exploring creative educational alternatives. Both have been satisfying in their own ways. However, 25 years after graduating I find that my heart lies in the sphere of education.

**W**hat follows is a mosaic which endeavours to provide an overview of today's market-driven world, the drawbacks of the present educational scenario and its history. After looking at the problems, we will look at possible child-friendly solutions. The alternatives presented will be for a range of situations, both for the affluent and the less privileged.

The education system today is a warped variation of a colonial legacy that we have lived with for over 180 years. The man largely responsible for it was Thomas Macaulay who came to India when William Bentinck was the Governor-General. In his address to the British Parliament in February 1835, he advanced his assessment of the state of the India's education as also his proposed changes.

The brazenly shocking part of his speech was that he believed that since India had an ancient tradition in education which was its great strength, for the British to enslave her people, it would be important to break the very backbone of the prevailing educational system. Consequently in March 1835, it was resolved that henceforth, English would be

the medium of instruction in all government schools. Also, the curriculum would mainly consist of English, mathematics and science, with a smattering of other subjects.

The agenda was to produce clerks and officers for the administrative services, and professionals needed to help develop infrastructure – cities, roads, bridges, hospitals etc. In one stroke, the process of colonizing the minds of our people began and from which we have yet to recover. Worse, policy-makers continue to be in that mode.

Gandhiji realized that for a free India we needed a new educational system. In 1937 he founded the Hindustani Taleemi Sangh in Sevagram, a group which worked on an educational programme conceived by him. It was called Nai Taleem. He believed that for education to be real, it should be activity-based and by the time children completed 7 or 8 years of schooling, they should not only have a fair amount of theoretical knowledge but also practical training in some art or craft. He wanted the activity to be so purposeful that their work would yield some small income which would go towards meeting part of the school expenses.

**T**he whole purpose of Nai Taleem was to equip people to enable themselves to raise their standard of living and be self-sufficient through their own efforts. Gandhiji believed that such an education would stop the exodus from the village to the city and help people adapt to their real social environment. Interesting experiments were carried out at the Sevagram schools under the direction of some devoted educationists.

Kala Bhavan, the art school at Sevagram was supervised by Devi Prasad, who had studied art in Shanti niketan under Nandalal Bose, Binode Bihari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij. India also had visionaries like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Krishnamurti, who understood the importance of creativity in education. In India, informal learning outside schools had played an important role for millennia. At home people learnt many skills within the extended family. Unfortunately, after independence, Nai Taleem was given short shrift.

The priorities after independence were to build the temples of modern India – big dams and industry. There also was an uncontrolled growth of cities with all the attendant problems. Gram Swaraj, Gandhiji's dream for revitalizing our villages was virtually forgotten. Education continued to look to the West for inspiration. In fact, what's worse is we have a *châlu* version of what the British left us.

**S**ince 1991, when the policy of economic liberalization was introduced, global market forces have been determining our people's lifestyles and values. The neo-colonial atmosphere has further increased our cultural and intellectual subordination. We ape the faults of the West, but do not value the virtues of our rich heritage. We tend to believe that higher education abroad enables better prospects, though innumerable western scholars and intellectuals have been inspired by India for a long time.

‘India is the cradle of the human race, the birthplace of human speech, the mother of history, the grandmother of legend, and the great grandmother of tradition. Our most instructive materials in human history are treasured up in India.’ Mark Twain (1835-1910)

‘We owe a lot to the Indians, who taught us how to count, without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have ever been made.’ Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

‘From the Vedas we learn the practical arts of surgery, medicine, music, house-building under which mechanized art is included. They are encyclopaedic of every aspect of life – culture, religion, science, ethics, law, cosmology and meteorology.’ William James (1842-1910)

These are but a few examples.

**T**he first world is now following ayurveda and yoga in a big way. Ironically, allopathy dominates our medical scene, largely because of monetary pressures from global pharmaceutical companies. We also fail to see that our market-driven policies are in reality neither people- nor eco-friendly. While the cities are prospering, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is rapidly widening. The environment is increasingly suffering at the cost of short-sighted development. The educational pressures on children are linked to the narrow, materialistic and selfish aspirations of the rich as well as the middle class.

These pressures have reached the play schools. Most parents are anxious about admission to schools, about their children’s performance throughout school, about admission to college and finally finding jobs and careers for them. The soulless education system is also geared to a tuition industry, which concentrates mainly on left-brain subjects to produce engineers, doctors and managers. Parents end up spending a fortune on donations for admissions, tutorials, counselling and psychiatrists. Childhood is becoming increasingly stressful. In fact, childhood is dying. Suicide rates before exams or after their results are reaching alarming proportions. Recently one child killed herself because of parental pressure. She thought that she was going to fail in her finals. This was before the results were announced. The irony is that she got 91%!

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 is intended to address these problems. The task is not easy because what Macaulay began so long ago cannot be undone overnight. The periodic lip service to Gandhiji is part of our national hypocrisy, which prevents us from arriving at any meaningful solutions.

The decision-makers in education are more interested in their salaries. Even those who appear to care, spend most of their time participating in seminars, workshops, giving speeches and television interviews and writing analytical essays for the press. Statistics tell us that 50% of India’s children do not complete school, and only 6% manage to go to college. Yet huge sums of money are spent on schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and institutions that are supposedly dedicated to the future generations.

The mental makeup of most urban children (and one is not talking about the underprivileged slum dwellers) is nourished by a diet of junk food, unwholesome television programmes and, of course, the daily dose of the meaningless, rat-race schooling. The joy of learning at a natural pace is rarely prevalent. There is an obsession with degrees. Education is 'result' oriented and cut throat. Also, today's children are becoming more and more independent in their career decisions. Because they have little by way of inspiration from the adults around them, the choices they make are rarely mature.

In a market-driven, consumer world, most of them want to make quick money, regardless of the means. Short stints at call centres are a good example. Honesty and sincerity seldom pay, definitely not enough to keep up with the Tanejas. The worship of Mammon is eating up the planet.

The global culture is in a depressive state – nuclear proliferation, depletion of resources, unemployment, oppression and starvation in the Third World, racism, genocide, terrorism, pollution, dehumanization of cities, rampant technocracy aided and abetted by rampant bureaucracy, ignorant visionless lobby-dominated politics and the commercial media. And the list can go on. Our leaders have no clue about possible solutions.

The joy of teaching is a thing of the past. Inspiring teachers have always been rare. Most of them are just doing a job. Many are there because they couldn't find employment elsewhere. Since the remuneration is not attractive, competence levels are low. Not to mention erratic attendance levels in government schools. Teachers cannot cope with the pressures either. Individual attention is not possible with forty or more children in a class. Homework has to be given and corrected, the syllabus has to be completed and examinations have to be prepared for. This leaves little time for their own growth. Learning is a life-long journey, and yet most educationists think they only need to teach. This vanity is specially noticeable in those with many degrees. Today, with the internet, children often know more than their teachers.

*'Ek sachchâ shikshak apne shishya kâ bhi shishya bankar rahta hai. Yadi is drishti se apne shishyon ko sikhâne kâ kâam karenge to âp unse bahut kuch pâyenge.'* (Gandhiji)

The truth is few teachers realize that one cannot teach. In none of the Indian languages is there a root word corresponding to the English word 'teach'. One can only help learn. Tagore, Aurobindo and Krishnamurti said that long ago. According to the American expert, Howard Gardner, all of us have several forms of intelligence. Our 'teaching' mainly deals with the intelligence required for learning languages, maths and science (left brain). It undervalues the importance of the intelligence related to learning music, arts and crafts, sports etc (right brain). Characteristics of the right hemisphere of the brain are creative thinking, intuition. The right brain does not exclude the left brain. It helps in seeing the whole picture. Gardner has also identified many other types of intelligence – interpersonal, intrapersonal, moral and spiritual. Inputs for these are difficult to

incorporate, when the atmosphere in the school and home environment is vitiated by growing decline in basic human values.

Cutting edge research tells us that all children learn at a different pace and in different ways that girls learn differently from boys. Yet we herd everybody together in boxed-in overcrowded classrooms in poorly designed buildings. Most schools have no facilities for children who are challenged, let alone understanding their needs and how to deal with them. Unless there is respect for children, unless we stop thinking that we can mould them, or prune and graft them, unless we stop treating them as inferiors, we will fail to make education child-friendly. At present children are just numbers on an assembly line. In a democracy, adults impose themselves on children and are autocratic.

Children make mistakes because they are open. As a result, the possibilities and avenues available to them are endless. Adults have to become like children if they wish to learn before they teach. And how to teach. The educational journey needs to be a celebration of life, where students can explore the forest of reality. At the heart of this celebration, learning can take place best through opportunities without unhealthy pressures to perform, and without unhealthy competition.

The aim of education ought to be to help children retain their sense of wonder, to develop a spirit of enquiry and to nurture the joy of learning. They should be exposed to a wide range of subjects and skills. Clearer choices in life become possible only after having holistic learning experiences. Elders should guide the children towards careers, keeping in mind their individual aptitudes and interests.

Every home can be a centre for learning. The spirit of enquiry should be fed with adequate materials to satisfy the hunger for exploring. This could include encyclopaedias, storybooks, special interest books, a wide range of music and films, cameras, binoculars, telescopes, magnifying glasses, microscopes, games and so on, depending on whatever is affordable. It is crucial that parents make time for children and celebrate the growth of their minds, bodies and spirits. For the less privileged, the government and business houses should help set up resource centres in every school.

At the NID, my interest in ecology gave me an opportunity to design the graphics for a nature discovery centre for children. It was followed by a job as the branch organizer for the North Gujarat branch of WWF in Ahmedabad. This involved taking children to nature camps to Pirotan, a coral island off the Gujarat coast, and the Gir forest to explore different ecosystems. This was the beginning of my love affair with nature, which has become an essential part of the programmes that I have been conducting for twenty five years. I have realized that appreciating the rhythms of nature and the rhythms of the cosmos and the connectivity of all things, is essential.

Over the years, the main focus of my programmes has been ecology, with art as the predominant vehicle. The participants spend their time observing the vast web of life – ranging from flora, fauna and the stars to architecture, sculpture, garments, jewellery and

utensils. They also have many hands-on experiences – painting, craft, photography, gardening, tree-planting and so on. I believe that tapping the inner wealth of children will make them less materialistic and better world citizens when they grow up.

**I**n 1994, I conducted a six month workshop at the Crafts Museum, where children from various schools in Delhi participated. The group was represented by many Indian schools (private and government), the American School, the French School and the German School. Over a period of six months, the children learnt several skills from crafts people from all over India – pottery, weaving bamboo baskets, appliqué, lost wax metal-casting, carving and painting wooden toys, scroll painting, glass painting, making stuffed toys and cutting paper stencils. They also observed several other craft skills (a variety of textile techniques, stone craft, glass craft etc.) and performing arts (folk dancing, puppetry, vocal and instrumental music etc.). Many hours were also spent in sketching, finding their inner essence. The participants who painted the scrolls, narrated their stories at the first ‘Man and Nature’ bazaar organized by Dastkar at Dilli Haat.

One of the stories narrated by a ten year old boy comes to mind. It was about a lizard that had lost its tail. As the tale unfolded, the scroll was unrolled showing a sequence of pictures. The lizard went about asking other animals – peacocks, cats, dogs, cows, horses, camels – if they had seen its tail. They all said that they had not. Time went by and one day the lizard happily discovered that it had grown a new tail. There were other interesting stories and quite a few of them had environmental messages. The workshop demonstrated that it could be a magical solution to several problems. It was clearly apparent that all children love to work with their hands, regardless of their social or economic background.

India is rich in human resources and education can easily be linked to crafts and the performing arts. The government will not have to incur major expenses as crafts people have been trained in their own communities for generations. Crafts are by and large eco-friendly. Learning to use tools and to manipulate materials helps brain development. This involves both the hemispheres of the brain. It is possible to offer this kind of design education to everybody. It has great vocational potential. Crafts people usually belong to the lower castes. This could be a great opportunity to empower them both socially and economically. To make this possible, what is needed is political will.

**A**t the French School I conducted a programme called ‘Artecology’ for six years (1990-1996). I was given a free hand to experiment. Children learnt about nature through assorted media, visited the zoo, museums, art galleries, monuments and parks. They also went on treks and attended camps where they explored India’s culture, history, rural life and its different ecosystems.

In the past five years I have run a weekend programme with environmental conservation as the focus. The participants have learnt about the connection between the crafts and natural materials – the use of fibres, dyes, stone, clay. They have also been exposed to various methods of rain-water harvesting, the regeneration of forests and the use of plants

and minerals in food and medicine. It is heartening that children who have difficulties in waking up on school days, are ready and eager to attend the weekend programme.

**O**f late, some schools have realized the importance of children learning craft skills and outdoor activities. They are being made a regular feature of the school curriculum. In the West it is now felt that art education helps people develop into successful professionals. Parents and teachers need to attend workshops, where they are sensitized to the creative potential of children. And the inherent dangers of suppressing them. It is also necessary to make them understand sustainability and ecological lifestyles. There will be myriads of questions for which the answers can be mutually found through continuous dialogue.

Adults need to participate not only in the education processes, but also to care about the burning issues of our times. In this connected world, this global village, we have the potential to share minds, to break free from repeated patterns, to find a common direction and journey into a future that respects every life form. India has the human resources and the potential to demonstrate how to synthesize the old and the new by taking the best from all over the world in an appropriate manner. I here leave the floor to a great mind, Arnold Toynbee:

‘Today we are still living in a transitional chapter of the world’s history, but it is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the race. At this dangerous moment in human history – the nuclear age – the only way of salvation is the Indian way.’

*Vāsudhaiva Kutumbakam* – the world is one family.