

A PREFACE ON NATIONAL EDUCATION*

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The necessity and unmixed good of universal education has become a fixed dogma to the modern intelligence, a thing held to be beyond dispute by any liberal mind or awakened national conscience, and whether the tenet be or not altogether beyond cavil, it may at any rate be presumed that it answers to a present and imperative need of the intellectual and vital effort of the race. But there is not quite so universal an agreement or common attainment to a reasoned or luminous idea on what education is or practically or ideally should be. Add to this uncertainty the demand — naturally insistent and clamorous with the awakening of the spirit of independence in a country like our own which is peculiarly circumstanced not only by the clash of the Asiatic and the European or occidental consciousness and the very different civilisations they have created and the enforced meeting of the English and the Indian mind and culture, but by a political subjection which has left the decisive shaping and supreme control of education in the hands of foreigners, — add the demand for a national type of education, and in the absence of clear ideas on the subject we are likely to enter, as we have in fact entered into an atmosphere of great and disconcerting confusion.

For if we do not know very clearly what education in general truly is or should be, we seem still less to know what we mean by national education. All that appears to be almost unanimously agreed on is that the teaching given in the existing schools and universities has been bad in kind and in addition denationalising, degrading and impoverishing to the national mind, soul and character because it is overshadowed by a foreign hand and foreign in aim, method, substance and spirit. But this purely negative agreement does not carry us very far: it does not tell us what in principle or practice we desire or ought to put in its place. There may be much virtue in an epithet but to tag on the word "national" to a school or college or even a Council or Board of Education, to put that into the hands of an indigenous agency, mostly of men trained in the very system we are denouncing, to reproduce that condemned system with certain differences, additions, subtractions, modifications of detail and curriculum, to tuck on a technical side and think we have solved the problem does not really change anything. To be satisfied with a trick of this kind is to perform a somersault round our centre of intellectual gravity, land ourselves where we were before and think we have got into quite another country, — obviously a very unsatisfactory proceeding. The institutions that go by the new name may or may not be giving a better education than the others, but in what they are more national, is not altogether clear even to the most willingly sympathetic critical intelligence.

The problem indeed is one of surpassing difficulty and it is not easy to discover from what point of thought or of practice one has to begin, on what principle to create or on what lines to map out the new building. The conditions are intricate and the thing that is to be created in a way entirely new. We cannot be satisfied with a mere resuscitation of some past principle, method and system that may have happened to prevail at one time in India, however great it was or in consonance with our past civilisation and culture. That reversion would be a sterile and impossible effort hopelessly inadequate to the pressing demands of the present and the far greater demands of our future. On the other hand to take over the English, German or American school and university or some variation on them with a gloss of

Indian colour is a course attractively facile and one that saves the need of thinking and of new experiment; but in that case there is no call for this loud pother about nationalising education, all that is needed is a change of control, of the medium of instruction, of the frame and fitting of the curriculum and to some extent of the balance of subjects. I presume that it is something more profound, great and searching that we have in mind and that, whatever the difficulty of giving it shape, it is an education proper to the Indian soul and need and temperament and culture that we are in quest of, not indeed something faithful merely to the past, but to the developing soul of India, to her future need, to the greatness of her coming self-creation, to her eternal spirit. It is this that we have to get clear in our minds and for that we must penetrate down to fundamentals and make those firm before we can greatly execute. Otherwise nothing is easier than to start off on a false but specious cry or from, an unsound starting-point and travel far away from the right path on a tangent that will lead us to no goal but only to emptiness and failure.

But first let us clear out of the way or at least put in its proper place and light the preliminary disabling objection that there is and can be no meaning at all or none worth troubling about in the idea of a national education and that the very notion is the undesirable and unprofitable intrusion of a false and narrow patriotism into a field in which patriotism apart from the need of a training in good citizenship has no legitimate place. And for that one purpose no special kind or form of education is needed, since the training to good citizenship must be in all essentials the same whether in the East or the West, England or Germany or Japan or India. Mankind and its needs are the same everywhere and truth and knowledge are one and have no country; education too must be a thing universal and without nationality or borders. What, for an instance, could be meant by a national education in Science, and does it signify that we are to reject modern truth and modern method of science because they come to us from Europe, and go back to the imperfect scientific knowledge of classical India, exile Galileo and Newton and all that came after and teach only what was known to Bhaskara, Aryabhata and Varahamihira? Or how should the teaching of Sanskrit or the living indigenous tongues differ in kind and method from the teaching of Latin or the living modern tongues in Europe? Are we then to fetch back to the methods of the "Tols" of Nadiya or to the system, if we can find out what it was, practised in ancient Takshashila or Nalanda? At most what can be demanded is a larger place for the study of the past of our country, the replacement of English by the indigenous tongues as a medium and the relegation of the former to the position of a second language, — but it is possible to challenge the advisability even of these changes. After all we live in the twentieth century and cannot revive the India of Chandragupta or Akbar; we must keep abreast with the march of truth and knowledge, fit ourselves for existence under actual circumstances, and our education must be therefore up to date in form and substance and modern in life and spirit.

All these objections are only pertinent if directed against the travesty of the idea of national education which would make of it a means of an obscurantist retrogression to the past forms that were once a living frame of our culture but are now dead or dying things; but that is not the idea nor the endeavour. The living spirit of the demand for national education no more requires a return to the astronomy and mathematics of Bhaskara or the forms of the system of Nalanda than the living spirit of Swadeshi a return from railway and motor traction to the ancient chariot and the bullock-cart. There is no doubt

plenty of retrogressive sentimentalism about and there have been some queer violences on common sense and reason and disconcerting freaks that prejudice the real issue, but these inconsequent streaks of fantasy give a false hue to the matter. It is the spirit, the living and vital issue that we have to do with, and there the question is not between modernism and antiquity, but between an imported civilisation and the greater possibilities of the Indian mind and nature, not between the present and the past, but between the present and the future. It is not a return to the fifth century but an initiation of the centuries to come, not a reversion but a break forward away from a present artificial falsity to her own greater innate potentialities that is demanded by the soul, by the Shakti of India.

The argument against national education proceeds in the first place upon the lifeless academic notion that the subject, the acquiring of this or that kind of information is the whole or the central matter. But the acquiring of various kinds of information is only one and not the chief of the means and necessities of education: its central aim is the building of the powers of the human mind and spirit, it is the formation or, as I would prefer to view it, the evoking of knowledge and will and of the power to use knowledge, character, culture, — that at least if no more. And this distinction makes an enormous difference. It is true enough that if all we ask for is the acquisition of the information put at our disposal by science, it may be enough to take over the science of the West whether in an undigested whole or in carefully packed morsels. But the major question is not merely what science we learn, but what we shall do with our science and how too, acquiring the scientific mind and recovering the habit of scientific discovery — I leave aside the possibility of the Indian mentality working freely in its own nature discovering new methods or even giving a new turn to physical science — we shall relate it to other powers of the human mind and scientific knowledge to other knowledge more intimate to other and not less light-giving and power-giving parts of our intelligence and nature. And there the peculiar cast of the Indian mind, its psychological tradition, its ancestral capacity, turn, knowledge bring in cultural elements of a supreme importance. A language, Sanskrit or another, should be acquired by whatever method is most natural, efficient and stimulating to the mind and we need not cling there to any past or present manner of teaching: but the vital question is how we are to learn and make use of Sanskrit and the indigenous languages so as to get to the heart and intimate sense of our own culture and establish a vivid continuity between the still living power of our past and the yet uncreated power of our future, and how we are to learn and use English or any other foreign tongue so as to know helpfully the life, ideas and culture of other countries and establish our right relations with the world around us. This is the aim and principle of a true national education, not, certainly, to ignore modern truth and knowledge, but to take our foundation on our own being, our own mind, our own spirit.

The second ground openly or tacitly taken by the hostile argument is that modern, that is to say, European civilisation is the thing that we have to acquire and fit ourselves for, so only can we live and prosper and it is this that our education must do for us. The idea of national education challenges the sufficiency of this assumption. Europe built up her ancient culture on a foundation largely taken from the East, from Egypt, Chaldea, Phoenicia, India, but turned in a new direction and another life-idea by the native spirit and temperament, mind and social genius of Greece and Rome, lost and then recovered it, in part from the Arabs with fresh borrowings from the near East and from India and more widely by the Renaissance, but then too gave it a new turn and direction proper to the native spirit and temperament,

mind and social genius of the Teutonic, and the Latin, the Celtic and Slav races. It is the civilisation so created that has long offered itself as the last and imperative word of the mind of humanity, but the nations of Asia are not bound so to accept it, and will do better, taking over in their turn whatever new knowledge or just ideas Europe has to offer, to assimilate them to their own knowledge and culture, their own native temperament and spirit, mind and nodal genius and out of that create the civilisation of the future. The scientific, rationalistic, industrial, pseudo-democratic civilisation of the West is now in process of dissolution and it would be a lunatic absurdity for us at this moment to build blindly on that sinking foundation. When the most advanced minds of the occident are beginning to turn in this red evening of the West for the hope of a new and more spiritual civilisation to the genius of Asia, it would be strange if we could think of nothing better than to cast away our own self and potentialities and put our trust in the dissolving and moribund past of Europe.

And, finally, the objection grounds itself on the implicit idea that the mind of man is the same everywhere and can everywhere be passed through the same machine and uniformly constructed to order. That is an old and effete superstition of the reason which it is time now to renounce. For within the universal mind and soul of humanity is the mind and soul of the individual with its infinite variation, its commonness and its uniqueness, and between them there stands an intermediate power, the mind of a nation, the soul of a people. And of all these three education must take account if it is to be, not a machine-made fabric, but a true building or a living evocation of the powers of the mind and spirit of the human being.

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These preliminary objections made to the very idea of national education and, incidentally, the misconceptions they oppose once out of the way, we have still to formulate more positively what the idea means to us, the principle and the form that national education must take in India, the thing to be achieved and the method and turn to be given to the endeavour. It is here that the real difficulty begins because we have for a long time, not only in education but in almost all things, in our whole cultural life, lost hold of the national spirit and idea and there has been as yet no effort of clear, sound and deep thinking or seeing which would enable us to recover it and therefore no clear agreement or even clear difference of opinion on essentials and accessories. At the most we have been satisfied with a strong sentiment and a general but shapeless idea and enthusiasm corresponding to the sentiment and have given to it in the form whatever haphazard application chanced to be agreeable to our intellectual associations, habits or caprices. The result has been no tangible or enduring success, but rather a maximum of confusion and failure. The first thing needed is to make clear to our own minds what the national spirit, temperament, idea, need demands of us through education and apply it in its right harmony to all the different elements of the problem. Only after that is done can we really hope with some confidence and chance of utility and success to replace the present false, empty and mechanical education by something better than a poor and futile chaos or a new mechanical falsity, by a real, living and creative upbringing of the Indian manhood of the future.

But first it is necessary to disengage from all ambiguities what we understand by a true education, its essential sense, its fundamental aim and significance. For we can then be sure of our beginnings and proceed securely to fix the just place and whole bearing of the epithet we seek to attach to the word. I must be sure what education itself is or should be before I can be sure what a national education is or should be. Let us begin then with our initial statement, as to which I think there can be no great dispute that there are three things which have to be taken into account in a true and living education, the man, the individual in his commonness and in his uniqueness, the nation or people and universal humanity. It follows that that alone will be a true and living education which helps to bring out to full advantage, makes ready for the full purpose and scope of human life all that is in the individual man, and which at the same time helps him to enter into his right relation with the life, mind and soul of the people or nation to which he belongs and with that great total life, mind and soul of humanity of which he himself is a unit and his people or nation a living, a separate and yet inseparable member. It is by considering the whole question in the light of this large and entire principle that we can best arrive at a clear idea of what we would have our education to be and what we shall strive to accomplish by a national education. Most is this largeness of view and foundation needed here and now in India, the whole energy of whose life purpose must be at this critical turning of her destinies directed to her one great need, to find and rebuild her true self in individual and in people and to take again, thus repossessed of her inner greatness, her due and natural portion and station in the life of the human race.

There are however very different conceptions possible of man and his life, of the nation and its life and of humanity and the life of the human race, and our idea and endeavour in education may well vary considerably according to that difference. India has always had her own peculiar conception and vision of these things and we must see whether it is not really, as it is likely to be, that which will be or ought to be at the very root of our education and the one thing that will give it its truly national character. Man has not been seen by the thought of India as a living body developed by physical Nature which has evolved certain vital propensities, an ego, a mind and a reason, an animal of the genus homo and in our case of the species homo indicus, whose whole life and education must be turned towards a satisfaction of these propensities under the government of a trained mind and reason and for the best advantage of the personal and the national ego. It has not been either the turn of her mind to regard man pre-eminently as a reasoning animal, or let us say, widening the familiar definition, a thinking, feeling and willing natural existence, a mental son of physical Nature, and his education as a culture of the mental capacities, or to define him as a political, social and economic being and his education as a training that will fit him to be an efficient, productive and well-disciplined member of the society mid the State. All these are no doubt aspects of the human being and she has given them a considerable prominence subject to her large vision, but they are outward things, parts of the instrumentation of his mind, life and action, not the whole or the real man.

India has seen always in man the individual a soul, a portion of the Divinity enwrapped in mind and body, a conscious manifestation in Nature of the universal self and spirit. Always she has distinguished and cultivated in him a mental, an intellectual, an ethical, dynamic and practical, an aesthetic and hedonistic, a vital and physical being, but all these have been seen as powers of a soul that manifests through them and grows with their growth, and yet they are not all the soul, because at the summit of its ascent it

arises to something greater than them all, into a spiritual being, and it is in this that she has found the supreme manifestation of the soul of man and his ultimate divine manhood, his *paramartha* and highest *purusartha*. And similarly India has not understood by the nation or people an organised State or an armed and efficient community well prepared for the struggle of life and putting all at the service of the national ego, — that is only the disguise of iron armour which masks and encumbers the national Purusha, — but a great communal soul and life that has appeared in the whole and has manifested a nature of its own and a law of that nature, a Swabhava and Swadharmā, and embodied it in its Intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, dynamic, social and political forms and culture. And equally then our cultural conception of humanity must be in accordance with her ancient vision of the universal manifesting in the human race, evolving through life and mind but with a high ultimate spiritual aim, - it must be the idea of the spirit, the soul of humanity advancing through struggle and concert towards oneness, increasing its experience and maintaining a needed diversity through the varied culture and life motives of its many peoples, searching for perfection through the development of the powers of the individual and his progress towards a diviner being and life, but feeling out too though more slowly after a similar perfectibility in the life of the race. It may be disputed whether this is a true account of the human or the national being, but if it is once admitted as a true description, then it should be clear that the only true education will be that which will be an instrument for this real working of the spirit in the mind and body of the individual and the nation. That is the principle on which we must build, that the central motive and the guiding ideal. It must be an education that for the individual will make its one central object the growth of the soul and its powers and possibilities, for the nation will keep first in view the preservation, strengthening and enrichment of the nation-soul and its Dharma and raise both into powers of the life and ascending mind and soul of humanity. And at no time will it lose sight of man's highest object, the awakening and development of his spiritual being.