

## **Beneath Colonial Modernity: Elements of an Indigenous Educational Praxis**

Kaustuv Roy  
Azim Premji University, India  
E-mail: kaustuv.roy@apu.edu.in

### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to construct elements of an indigenous pedagogy from the practices, truths, and relations buried under the onslaught of colonial modernity, a vicious combine that has mostly left the erstwhile colonized nations like India in denial of their own truths, native understandings, and deeper insights into life and purpose. In particular, the educational practices and values coming out of colonial modernity have been culturally catastrophic for children of ordinary folk who have had to deal with the tidal wave of monetary and market relations on the one hand, and a meaningless and alienating education on the other, losing their ordinary humanity to a ruthless global machine. The paper argues that it is more important now than ever to reengage with indigenous wisdom to craft a radical curriculum that cuts through the miasma and cultural deceit handed out as education to hapless children.

*Keywords:* colonial modernity, alienated education, indigenous wisdom, epistemic diversity, liberation theology

In *Another Knowledge is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos et al (2008) write:

...there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice. Probably more than ever, global capitalism appears as a civilizational paradigm encompassing all domains of social life. The exclusion, oppression, and

discrimination it produces have not only economic, social, and political dimensions but also cultural and epistemological ones. Accordingly, to confront this paradigm in all its dimensions is the challenge facing a new critical theory and new emancipatory practices. Contrary to their predecessors, this theory and these practices must start from the premise that the epistemological diversity of the world is immense, as immense as its cultural diversity and that the recognition of such diversity must be at the core of...the formulation of alternative forms of sociability. (p. xix)

To take that one step further, there can be little hope of cognitive justice without reeducating our senses and sensibilities in directions different than the organizing pattern of the existing paradigm and its bankrupt social imaginary. In other words, apart from everything else, at the heart of any such emancipatory venture lies the challenge of envisioning and practicing an education that is built not from the assumptions and spin-offs of an overarching globalized technicity, but from the intimate correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm at the level of the entity. Those correspondences have within them spaces, powers, significations, meanings, and fulfillments that are beyond the reductionism of the civilizational paradigm of modernity. Global capitalism and its relentless attempts to turn human beings into raw material for the production process can only be confronted by discovering within ourselves, that is, within the peripheral being, new powers of becoming and resistance, which requires a different education. And for that, we have not only to cross epistemological boundaries but ontological ones as well, as this paper purports to show.

Modern mainstream education in general attempts to fit the individual into the world-apparent – that is to say, rudely or subtly force the ontological being into the existing majoritarian conceptual model and representational schema of the world. In doing this, conventional curriculum takes for granted the commonsense construct called the “individual,” as well as the commonsense construct called the “world,” and does not seriously interrogate these categories or the relation between them. In other words, the habits of thought by which the “individual” as well as the “world” become commonsense phenomenologically remains outside the purview of education. Thus mainstream education poses itself between two gross notions that masquerade as known, as given. The result is unintelligent, to say the least, and can only serve the interests of capital as well as reflect its contradictions. In *Emile*, his famous treatise on education, Rousseau (1921) gives a scorching account of the contradiction:

I do not consider our ridiculous colleges as public institutes, nor do I include under this head a fashionable education, for this education facing two ways at once achieves nothing. It is only fit to turn out hypocrites, always professing to live for others, while thinking of themselves alone. These professions, however, deceive no one, for everyone has his share in them; they are so much labour wasted. Our inner conflicts are caused by these contradictions. Drawn this way by nature and that way by man, compelled to yield to both forces, we make a compromise and reach neither goal. We go through life, struggling and hesitating, and die before we have found peace, useless alike to ourselves and to others. (p. 17)

This is a graphic and accurate indictment but for one important fact. This thing we call “modern education” has had vastly different consequences for different groups. Modern education is far more disastrous for those societies that have been subjugated either directly by colonial rule or through economic and cultural hegemony. Having abandoned their native understandings of, and equation with, their world, these societies have attempted or been forced to internalize wholesale the values, attitudes, and biases of their erstwhile colonial masters resulting in the peculiar beast called colonial modernity. This hybrid has systematically replaced whatever remained of indigenous conceptions and relations with the world with a toxic precipitate called modern education that neither serves the “educated,” nor the society of which they are a part, in any real sense (of improved livability).

This is because colonial modernity is primarily a moral production with a missionary edge. Its moral and cultural roots lay in a belief that modernity introduced civilizing structures into the primitive world that would give rise to the analytical and critical spirit in the colonized subject, and which will one day, or so the hope went, make them rise above their heathen spirit. But Ashis Nandy (2005) writes:

Many many decades later, in that aftermath of modern technology called the Second World War and perhaps that modern encounter of cultures called Vietnam, it has become obvious that the drive for mastery over men is not merely a by-product of a faulty political economy but also of a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the nonhuman and the subhuman, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical, and the modern over the traditional or the savage. It has become more and more apparent that genocides, ecodisasters and ethnocides are but the underside of corrupt sciences and psychopathic technologies wedded to new secular hierarchies, which have reduced major

civilizations to the status of a set of empty rituals... The ancient forces of human greed and violence, one recognizes, have merely found a new legitimacy in anthropocentric doctrines of secular salvation, in the ideologies of progress, normality and hypermasculinity. (p. i)

The colonial body, just as the Black slave, was the experimental field on whom an emergent epistemic that would eventually supplant all other epistemologies was consciously as well as unconsciously worked out. More than planetary technicity or military dominance, this required another kind of colonization in order to complete its project.

This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category... This is the story of the second colonization... We are concerned with a colonialism which survives the demise of empires. (Nandy, 2005, p. ii)

The psychology of colonialism comes to full fruition within polarities such as the modern and the backward, and it survives the collapse of Empire precisely because it is, by now, the only way for the native to understand themselves and their relation to the world. Countries and peoples freed from the political yoke of colonialism merely come to reproduce the values, ideology and the world view of colonialism; instead of a postcolonial society, we witness the production of a neo-colonial state with the psychological baggage of colonialism intact under different guises. In the case of India (and the rest of the article will focus on this ostensibly de-colonized nation), it means a center and periphery constructed out of semi-feudal landlords, native capitalists, a comprador middle class, an intelligentsia who are the “processors” of the West, and a colossal disenfranchised population who are merely led.

It would then hardly be surprising that the cultural priorities that drive the neocolonial society would also drive state-led modern education, resulting in a decadent miseducation that works not for the transformation of society but towards maintaining the old colonial exploitative relations and its reward system. It would be relevant here to mention two of the most strident and discerning anticolonial voices that served early warning to the emergent Indian nation: the voices of Tagore and Gandhi, neither of whom were apologists, and both of whom spoke from outside the Imperium. Let us begin with a few insights from Tagore, one of

the most original thinker-practitioners in education apart from being a poet-philosopher-playwright:

Education is not like a painful hospital treatment for curing students of the congenital malady of their ignorance, but is a function of health, the natural expression of the mind's vitality. [Hence] education should not be dragged out of its native elements, the life-current of the people. (Tagore, 1947, pp. 2-6)

And again,

Great civilizations in the East as well as in the West, have flourished in the past because [their education] produced food for the spirit of man... These great civilizations were run to death by men of the type of our precocious schoolboys of modern times, smart and superficially critical, worshippers of self, shrewd bargainers in the market of profit and power, efficient in their handling of the ephemeral, who presume to buy human souls with their money, and throw them into the dustbins when they have been sucked dry, and who, eventually, driven by suicidal forces of passion, set their neighbours' houses on fire and are themselves enveloped by the flame. (Tagore, 1970, p. 629)

There are many lessons to be learnt in the above lines. First and foremost, Tagore does not use the language and categories of colonial modernity to understand and measure education. Whereas, the "postcolonial" or modern Indian educator-bureaucrat, raised on a diet of second order colonization, uses quantitative measures such as "literacy rate", "access", "achievement", "dropout", etc., each a part of the diagnostic discourse of mainstream modernist thinking in education, for Tagore education remains a supremely qualitative phenomenon. Second, unlike the modernist discourse, for Tagore education is not the mechanical-bureaucratic-missionary removal of ignorance but a creatively developing equation between the learners and their wider environment. The latter vision obviously means that education cannot be merely about heaping of alien concepts on the passive learner removed from their native elements. And thirdly, there is the vital realization in Tagore that the elite construction of self that is worshipped in modernity is, and has been, the root cause of many civilizational disasters. The egotistic schoolboy grows up within the psychological assumptions of modern schooling into an isolated, exploitative adult, projects his egotism on the world, and reacts to the fragmentation as an independent reality, which is in actuality his own projection, bringing further chaos upon the world and himself.

Next let us briefly consider Gandhi's position regarding de-colonized education, a thinker who consistently refused to fetishize book learning:

I have never been able to make a fetish of literary training. My experience has proved to my satisfaction that literary training by itself adds not an inch to one's moral height and that character-building is independent of literary training. I am firmly of opinion that the Government schools have unmanned us, rendered us helpless and godless. They have filled us with discontent, and providing no remedy for the discontent, have made us despondent. They have made us what we were intended to become, clerks and interpreters. (Gandhi, 1921, p. 2)

And again,

It is equally certain that modern, foreign, non-national education makes young people unfit for any useful function in life. The vast majority of people that sent their children to the English schools were agriculturists, men and women with a deep and abiding faith in God. There is no doubt that the young people when they came back knew not a thing about agriculture, were indeed deeply contemptuous of the calling of their fathers and professed to have outgrown all faith in God or in His fulfilling providence. 'Reforms' have succeeded 'Reforms' in the educational system, Commissions have considered the case of the Universities, primary instruction has been sought to be made compulsory; but there has never been the remotest perception of the fact that the whole thing is an evil because it was destroying the very foundations of all national life and growth. (Gandhi, 1924, p. 1)

To Gandhi the primary purpose of education, which he derived from his own tradition and the ancient culture of India, was character building and the development of a transpersonal moral conscience that could respond accurately to the surrounding environment and to the other. He did not believe that modernist bookish learning contributed to either; in fact, it did the very opposite in making young people alienated from their environment and indifferent to the larger fate of their community. If education meant working towards creative and compassionate living, then locking children in classrooms with a book in front of them did not serve the purpose.

In Indian education, the wholesale import of ideas and methods that keep failing to meet the real needs of the people has become the general order of things

since before the time of Gandhi. Empirically speaking, one has only to visit an average government-run school on an average day in any Indian city, town, or village to see that such is the case. Stick-wielding teachers grimly supervise clueless children in impoverished environments, forcing upon them factoids alien to their lives, and punish them for malingering. It is a mockery and a travesty we have brought upon ourselves, in order to maintain faith in the reward system of the modern political economy. The wholesale failure of education allows small pockets of triumphalist modernity to showcase itself in a miniscule minority, who earn the skills to master colonial education and enter privileged institutions that provide the credentials for colonial-style exploitation of the environment, the countryside, and the disprivileged. Meanwhile, chaos prevails over the ordinary schools across the country, and young children remain in darkness about what education could do and was meant to do for them.

We educators of the post-colonial era are guilty of what we could have done but did not do. This is a double loss, for it is not only a loss of what might have been, but also the forfeiture of the new observational perch that such a social realization would have afforded. This is what I call colonial *an-aesthetics*, and education has everything to do with it, is at the same time its parent and its child. Human energies and education could have gone, for instance, towards preservation of life qualities, towards maintaining the ecological balance, towards a non-abusive, non-polluting way of life, and towards discovering the unique potential in each human being. Instead, following dominant and hegemonic cultures, we chose a ruthlessly totalitarian quality in the way life, reality, and relations are organized. With the tendency and borrowed technical power to shape and control the attenuated world through the ever same products, formats, lifestyles, terms, phrases, and activities, which create a kind of technological mask and linguistic web, we have systematically reduced the possibility of thinking the world differently, of imagining the world differently, of welcoming the world differently, and of leaving the world differently. The patterns of thought set through standardized forms of experience get replicated through colonial style education that offers nothing but a way to settle down amidst the cultural ruins of the erstwhile colonized. The middle-class flag is hoisted and the reality-adjusted colonized subject finds nothing amiss, other than creature discomforts, and asks to be left alone to enjoy gadgets and trophies.

In any state of advanced decay, such as the education system in India, a dramatic turnaround is a romantic pie in the sky, but it is not unreasonable to hope for small movements here and there that dig deep into available light. What is being claimed is that despite all the talk of economic advancement etc., the

prevailing thought systems especially in education have unutterably failed in either helping to bring about a reasonable human being or a livable society, and it is the task of thoughtful educators to come out of the current state of catalepsy and invent a new idiom that can deal with the times without destroying what remains of livability. This is not about some arcane revivalism, but an attempt to engage subterranean pools of existing wisdom that are presently buried under the debris of modernity and its reductionist social imaginary. The present paper suggests that, before we lose the public space completely to a marauding consciousness whose sole watchword is modernist exploitation of resources and instrumental aims like “skill development”, at least some educators might take a stance and begin a countervailing movement to bring elements of indigenous thinking, and therefore sanity, back into the picture. Let us look at some of these elements and their relationships that might help us to visualize the beginnings of an alternative course of thinking in education.

In contrast to the outlook of colonial modernity, in indigenous Indian consideration, education was not the mere gathering of knowledge for understanding, categorizing, and efficiently manipulating material objects; it was the very transformation of the human from a lower ontological state to a higher order of being.

In classical Indian philosophers’ view ‘education’ is a means of transforming human beings from a lower state to a higher state. Education must liberate small minds and transform them to universal mind. On one hand, it should take care of the basic needs of one and all, on the other, it should also show the path to move towards their ultimate goal of life. The ‘education’ which does not take into account the ultimate goal of life namely, a sense of fulfillment, is no education at all. In other words, ‘education’ must aim at transforming a man in such a way that he or she ultimately gets a feeling of ‘fulfillment’ or from ‘exclusiveness’ to ‘inclusiveness’. Transformation is understood as gradual ‘freedom from narrowness or bondage’ and complete transformation will mean complete freedom from all narrowness, conditioned state of mind, and identification of the universals. The classical Indian philosophers have identified that ultimate state as the state of discovering one’s own self. A true education must lead one to that state ultimately. No ‘education’ which does not do this job is worth its name.(Jha, 2012, p. 3)

One can see that the transformation sought through education is an ontological one. The incomplete project of the human—the becoming of the human—lay in this



transformation. Unlike Western philosophy which has more and more side-stepped ontology and virtually put all its eggs in the epistemological basket, Eastern indigenous thought put the ontological transformation before anything else. Further, the possibility of going beyond the exclusivity of the individual mind to a trans-individual inclusiveness is a bold experiment, the promise of which is held out by several indigenous schools of thought. For the rest of the article, I will present some of the useful transformative notions taken from these sources, which shift the focus of learning from the mind to the heart, and see the lighting of the inner lamp as the major purpose of education. Taken together, these constitute a useful ground for exploring what could be an alternative way to think and practice education.

Classical Indian wisdom holds that it is entirely inadequate merely to teach secular knowledge or knowledge about the outer world. Instead, knowledge about the world must be placed within the context of the central query: ‘Who is the knower?’ The knower cannot be taken for granted. And without this deeper ontological and phenomenological query, objective knowledge turns against the knower and the network of relationships in terms of their real interests. To put it differently, knowing is easy, but knowing what to do with knowledge is a far more difficult, urgent and intimate task. Thus according to local wisdom, education must be prefaced and foregrounded by self-inquiry and a bridge must be built between the inner and the outer. This requires several kinds of psychic, affective, mental, and physical engagement and effort, alongside objective knowledge acquisition. It also requires many kinds of sacrifices that help create the “inner” atmosphere for proper reception of the outer. In the following paragraphs we will look at some of these concept-practices that have existed in indigenous culture. In doing this there must be the admission that the writer has been highly selective and followed his own bias and familiarity in presenting certain notions and practices and not others. Hence the presentation must be taken as a mere glimpse into a different world that cannot be reduced to the modern. There are many such worlds.

### **Elements of an Indigenous Praxis**

As such it is not overstating the case to say that human beings in general are torn by conflict, at the individual as well as the societal level, history being a mute witness to it. For example, we want peace but endlessly prepare for war; we want community but are fiercely competitive. In education, we say that we want to bring about an enlightened citizenry, but the educational process itself is geared towards turning out self-centered individuals who neither understand themselves deeply nor know how to engage with the collective beyond relations of exchange. The actions

that come out of the contradictory impulses are there for all to see. We are torn between opposing impulses, striking up various compromises whose consequence is a life lived in contradiction. Education seemingly has nothing to do with the contradiction and conflict all around and the consequent reduced livability for all.

However, if living a life of non-contradiction, as Socrates demanded (Scolnicov, 1994), and echoed by Eastern thought, is accepted as one of the reasonable goals of enlightened and educated life, then certain indigenous conceptions which have been buried under modernity have something to offer. Among the older Indian texts, the highly popular *Bhagwad Gita* (2015), for example, has much to say about conflict and contradiction and speaks time and again of the importance of the state of *dwandatita* or *nirdwanda*, i.e. a state of being without or beyond contradiction. Unfortunately, the bosses of Indian curricula are too busy aligning themselves with international criteria, and hence such notions are not pedagogically explored, left at the outer periphery of the social imaginary, or seen as non-secular and therefore rejected. The idea itself is not difficult: a new quality of energy is discovered when the psyche renounces contradiction and the conflicted individual moves towards a sense of wholeness.

Pedagogically, in passage after passage, the *Gita* tells us how this may be achieved. The most radical of these directions is to *act without seeking the fruits of action*. The mystery of action in the human is revealed as true self-recovery. Conflict and contradiction arise when we direct consciousness towards the results and fruits of action, which are nothing but ephemeral and happenstance. But when action is mainly directed towards self-knowing it has a different quality; we are led into a zone where the observer or the actor can no longer be materially distinguished from the conditions of observation or action. This brings about a strange freedom, and is therefore a praxis in and of itself. It means that the motivation for action comes less from what action achieves outwardly but from the intrinsic quality of the action itself, which, acting as a mirror, teaches us about ourselves more than anything else. In other words, the real “fruit” is in learning about ourselves. Pedagogically, if we do not know ourselves, then all education fails to bring about the reasonable human being.

How can this be introduced in the educational setting? Gandhi suggested the continuous and conscious engagement with manual labor such as spinning, weaving, and tilling, less for what these activities produced in terms of material products than the understanding of egotistic resistance, separation, division, and confusion in the very act of performing these tasks. If the settled division of labor in society produces a particular contour of sanctified egos, then the disturbing of the hierarchy of labor is essential to destroy the false reality and along with it our

wrong ideas of ourselves. Tagore, the other radical educator I have mentioned earlier, had similar ideas when he demanded that students together produce and maintain what he called the “nest” rather than be held in a “cage” not of their own making. The nest was a collective consciousness that was diametrically different from the individualized monad of modernity and its focus was responsible living rather than individual acquisition.

This is so different from what colonial modernity and dominate cultures have taught us, whose main focus is the fruit of action, and the bigger the fruit the better. The implications for education are immediately obvious. One goes through the curriculum not for the mastery of knowledge but what the action of learning reveals about oneself, for the real purpose of life and the world hides in the being; the macrocosm is pedagogically revealed in the microcosm. Knowledge acquisition thus finds its proper place in aligning the human being with ‘what is’ or the ontological state of the world. This movement of wholeness is truly non-exclusive and can therefore achieve the larger aim of education, which is to lead a life without contradiction. It also provides the right distance from the spectacle of cruel and mindless competition and acquisition in which modern education is mired.

However, a life without contradiction is not easy to achieve, especially in the ‘modern’ world, where a human being from birth is trained to become an avid participant-spectator-consumer of the existing economic and social order. That is to say, the task becomes complex when the very social measure of one’s life lies in contradiction. A certain recoil from this man-made chaos becomes essential in order to be able to grasp again the threads of inwardness. So, alongside acquisition of conceptual knowledge, the native concept-practice of *tyaga* (relinquishment), as explained below, is crucial, which is the second native philosophical idea in which education could be grounded. The *Isha Upanishad* (2014) gives the strategy of “*tyaktena bhunjita*”, which implies limited partaking of the world while distancing it at the same time. That is to say, we receive into ourselves certain fruits of the world while maintaining a psychological distance, never giving the material and sensual more space and importance than is absolutely necessary to maintain life. The atmosphere of lesser is better has to be consciously cultivated in the educational environment as a countercurrent to the consumerist approach to knowledge and schooling. An embodied being has material needs, but when these needs turn into wants, then chaos, suspicion, and war ensue. Needs can be identified and limited, whereas wants are manufactured cravings that have no basis other than psychological indulgence.

How is this to be thought of pragmatically in the context of education? Tagore suggested that all of education was nothing but “*bodher sadhana*” or a cultivation of the sensibilities. This cultivation could only take place by being as close to nature as possible and observing natural processes aesthetically. The organic extension of sensibilities is made possible by resonances that emanate from within nature—rocks, trees, insects, flowers, clouds, water, sunset, and so on. The extended sensibility appears as an organic limit to the rapacity of the ordinary, unredeemed consciousness. What is being alluded to is a state-of-love when the senses are performing intensely, which is the ultimate possibility of emancipatory education.

The dividing line between genuine needs and psychological wants must be discovered through gradual unfoldment of our true relations with the natural world. It cannot be achieved within the brutal materiality and ideological apparatus of modernity. To prevent the overstepping of need into the arena of endless want and its justification, a deep inquiry into the mode of association with worldly things and images is needed. It is only through such careful inquiry a proper relationship with the material world can emerge and not by simply superimposing the idea of *tyaga* (relinquishment) on existing relations. That would only result in hypocrisy and not wisdom. One must also guard against the shallow interpretation of *tyaga* as forsaking the world and embracing asceticism, although that is one of its extreme possibilities. This kind of interpretation, especially in Western texts, has resulted in the shunning of one of the most useful notions in understanding object relations and the place of human beings amongst the things of the world. It is the task of education to work with this notion and make it operational in daily life as well as lay out a rich conceptual platform that allows each to work out her/his praxis.

The practice of *tyaga* cannot be carried out in isolation. It is concomitant to the simultaneous grasp of other cognate ideas and practices that together form a whole. One such notion is ‘*ahankara*’ or the psychological ‘self’ or ‘ego’. Worldly grasping organizes itself around an empirical ego that is the center of want. It is therefore of prime importance to discover for oneself the nature of this ego or self. If the self is ontologically equivalent to the trees and the rocks there is obviously little we can do about it. However, if it is a different phenomenon than material objects then we must discover its nature and its relationship with things that lie on a different ontological plane. It is a demonstrable fact that if the human brain is cut open, we do not find the “self” anywhere. And yet it is the most persistent sensation contributing to the fact that it becomes the central unit of analysis in modernist thinking. The relevant question is therefore who or what posits the ‘I’? In other words, what is the inner process that makes the claim that ‘I’ exist? For

Descartes (1986), the mere presence of thinking indicated self-presence. As such it is leap of faith not substantiated by reason. But within the indigenous perceptions we are discussing no such leap of faith is required. Instead, the process of ‘I’ formation is put under careful scrutiny, not merely in theory but in individual practice.

Here Tagore suggests turning away from the petty idea of success with which the individual ego is closely tied and turning instead towards an impossible ideal. He places this hope at the conceptual heart of the educational project—Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, India—that he was trying to build at the time:

We are building up our institution upon the ideal of the spiritual unity of all races. I hope it is going to be a meeting place for [all those] who believe in the divine in humanity... Such idealists I have frequently met in my travels in the West, often unknown persons, of no special reputation, who suffer and struggle for a cause generally ignored by the clever and the powerful. These individuals [can] usher a new sunrise of truth and love, like that great personality [Christ] who had only a small number of disciples from among the insignificant, and who at the end presented a pitiful picture of failure. He was reviled by those in power, unknown by the larger world, and suffered an inglorious death, and yet through the symbol of this failure he conquers and lives forever. (Tagore, 1970, p. 628)

Pedagogically, Tagore shifts the attention from petty worldly success of the individual to the combined struggle for truth and love in which the so-called individual is a part of an intelligent process that discards power-over-the-other as a valid mode of organizing the world. Contrary to the Nietzschean (1918) critique of the perceived valorization of weakness, the poet-educator strikes a Franciscan note in seeing triumph in worldly failure. This is not the sentiment of the weak, as Nietzsche (1918) had believed, but a pliability that refuses the easy recourse to an isolated ego. In doing so it is moved from the sentimental plane to a metaphysical one.

Thus, if triumph is delinked from individuality, the question arises: what is the educand, or rather, what is it that is being educated? As remarked above, Western philosophy takes the self as given and works around this ontological assumption giving it unquestioned reality. Therefore education is provided to the ‘I’, fattening it and making it the central unit of social, cultural, and epistemological considerations. However, when this ontological assumption is absent, the nature of education changes dramatically. If there is no existential

assumption about the central unit—the self—that is supposedly acquiring knowledge, then what is the function, purpose, process, and meaning of education? In other words, if education is not a laurel to be picked up by a transcendental ‘I’ then who is the learner and what is the site of learning? We can see that in such a case, the very plane of education becomes altered. It is the task of vernacular education to discover the nature of this altered terrain and place the hypothetical or contingent self in relation to it. If we carry out this ontological task we are likely to discover divergent rhythms within us, and interesting discontinuities that open ourselves up to surprise. There is a moment that is outside the staleness of thought.

Also, it can be said that in such a transformation, the tension between the self and society, the individual and the collective, about which so much has been written and debated in the West, disappears. It appears now as a false debate based on wrong categories and assumptions. Here a useful reference can be made to John Dewey (1925), who observed that in actuality there were no actors, only action. Henceforth, emancipatory educational theory will have to go ahead without implicitly or explicitly assuming an actor, that is, by displacing the thinker with the procession of thoughts. The individual Will, a spatial concentration, melts down to an experience of duration. For Gandhi, this melting of the individual Will was experienced in voluntary suffering that he outlined in his conception of “*Swaraj*” or self-rule.

In order to be able to further grasp the truth of this, vernacular thought investigates another philosophical notion, namely, *sankalpa*, or Will. If the self or ego, is discovered as a form of ideational superstition, then what happens to the will that seemingly directs human effort? Questions about will, especially ‘free will’, dominate Western discussions of philosophy. However free will does not assume great importance in native philosophical thought. We see why that is the case in Ramanuja’s (1978) writings:

The Supreme Being then entered [into each conscious being] being their support in order to realise these [powers] and He rules as one who permits [each conscious being to undertake the action s/he wants to undertake]. In this way, He remains the Entire to which all parts belong. Therefore, [each conscious being], having received the power [to think, undertake or cease an action], undertakes, ceases to act or [thinks] from himself/herself. (pp. 138-141)

There is no free will other than the operation of divine wholeness that operates through all beings. The power to think and act cannot be evaluated other than by

taking the sum total of all conscious beings and their actions. In other words, we cannot understand this in an isolated manner or in relation to particular beings. The problem of philosophy is therefore not whether organisms have free will or not, but to grasp the point of entry and departure of that divine will that moves in us and to discover its real purpose. This is philosophically the true pedagogic act for it urges the individual consciousness towards discovering the larger whole of which s/he is an integral part, and without an intuition of which we are doomed to live in isolation and contradiction. What does this mean for the learning situation? Through relentless investigation of the relations between microcosm and macrocosm, the curriculum must allow the learner to discover the true nature of Will. Moreover, the mere knowledge or reading about it is not enough; we must investigate till it becomes the stuff of our consciousness. From a willful being, who foregrounds his own powers and desires, which leads to the contradictory and the delusional, the student moves towards a perception of non-conflict between self and other. It is not that one becomes will-less, but rather cognitively and existentially another window is opened up in which we can see all fragmentary wills in their true perspective. This is an important psychic development in attempting to bring about a peaceable and livable world.

The next related notion derived from indigenous insight that is useful to consider here is '*samskara*,' meaning mental impressions and conditionings (*Mundaka Upanishad*, 2005). In the popular idiom it also means cultural beliefs, but it formally denotes the psychic filters and deployments of the organs of perception, and therefore its great value for apprehending the object relations embedded in human collectivities. Its central importance from the perspective of education lies in the fact that without a preliminary understanding of the processes by which mental representation of outer reality take place in us there is little hope of creating an adequate basis for learning about the world; on the other hand, there is plenty of scope for creating confusion and suffering. Cognitive formations are not independent of our background conditionings and the psychic atmosphere created by residual memories. Besides, this is more than an epistemic consideration; it goes all the way to the instruments of knowledge perception themselves (Aurobindo, 2003). In other words, it is ontological.

To put it differently, the *samskaras* organize our representations of the world and we have to understand their performance through direct, unceasing observation. It cannot be grasped by, say, reading a book about it. Further, conditioned reality has to be pierced in order to go beyond the fragmentary consciousness generated by residual affects, sense impressions, and particular orientation of receptor mechanisms. This is the larger goal that requires a lifetime

of diligence. A life of non-contradiction, which is the aim of doing traditional education, necessitates an adequate understanding of the conditioned mind, its arising and subsidence. It is a process of slow and patient discovery that must be carried out by each one aspiring to be thus educated. One might even say that the entire effort of education is nothing other than to work free of all the conditionings that limit our ways of looking and perceiving. Otherwise we become producers of *dukkah* or suffering, another notion important for indigenous praxis.

*Dukkah* (sorrow or suffering), in Indian tradition, must not be understood in opposition to happiness (Rahula, 1959). All or mental modifications, whether identified as pain or pleasure, ultimately lead to sorrow or suffering. It is not a selective category based on vulgar dichotomy. Philosophically one must locate the sources of suffering and eliminate them in order to lead the peaceful or non-contradictory life. The *Gita* (2015, Ch. 5) says, “*Ye hi samsparsha-ja bhoga, dukkha yonaya eva te, adi-anta-vanta Kounteya, na tesu ramate budha.*” Loosely translated, it means that since all sensory enjoyments have a beginning and an end, they also bring suffering in their wake; therefore, it is best not to indulge in the impermanent. In other words, the fleeting nature of sensory experience always brings a sense of loss in its wake, and therefore suffering follows. In order to lead a life of non-contradiction, which we have said is a fundamental purpose of education, one must understand thoroughly the nature of sorrow and suffering. When the consciousness has learnt not to bring fresh suffering upon itself, to that extent it is liberated. This limited freedom brings new insights progressively.

Individually as well as socially, *dukkah* assumes immense importance. When we bring suffering upon ourselves through craving of worldly things and intemperance, we also affect others in the process. Suffering spreads like ripples on the surface of a pond in ever-larger circles. Social violence, the result of incorrect understanding of the impermanent, is a clear example of how disaffect spreads to larger and larger groups from a point of origin. The systematic production of poverty and destitution through the ignorance and greed of some is yet another example. Adequate education ought to show people to view the coming-to-be and the ceasing-to-be of phenomena so that we become less desperately attached to and dependent on phenomenal conditions.

Freedom from the existential state called *dukkha* also brings about compassion toward one’s fellow beings (Gethin, 1998). That is to say, phenomenal understanding and even a partial transcendence of phenomenal attachment bestows us with feelings of deep kindness towards others since we are no longer caught up in our own suffering and do not look upon others as our competitors or as enemy.



Hence, educationally, the concept of *karuna*, or compassion, must be studied well. Compassion here does not mean ordinary feelings of sympathy, empathy, pity etc. Rather, *karuna* is a transcendental state in which the fundamental opposition between self and other, which is the main cause of conflict in the world, is diminished. In other words, compassion is not a personal quality or individual attribute; *karuna* is not something you or I possess. It is a trans-personal phenomenon that comes about precisely when we are somewhat free of the claims of personhood. This releases the otherwise trapped non-individuated psychic energies for creating new relations on a creative plane. Compassion thus introduces the all-important limiting principle in human action, a limit on self-centered action that is otherwise missing. The lack of an organic limit is responsible for much of the chaos in the human world. *Karuna* or compassion is the other side of fulfillment, and the person who comes upon it has fewer dependencies on the outer world and hence fewer reasons for committing violence upon others.

I will conclude by mentioning two more indigenous notions/practices available among others in traditional Indian thought which I consider invaluable for education, namely, *swasthya* (loosely translated as health) and *vyayama* (effort). Right health and right effort are two underlying prerequisites for native praxis. *Swasthya* does not mean mere absence of disease; rather, it means self-dependence or a freedom from dependence on the external conditions of life. One who possesses *swasthya* is relatively free from bodily disruptions and so can focus on her/his chosen path. For this a very elaborate code of conduct has been laid down in Ayurveda called *Swasthya Vrutta* (Frowley, 1997). *Swasthya* is a holistic concept-practice that attempts to bring awareness to every part of the body and the being including the knowledge as to what is needed to keep the different centers of the body-mind complex working in harmony. The effort is to find and function according to a rhythm natural to the specific being and the purpose is to reach the life of non-contradiction that is the ultimate goal of human life.

Closely related to the above concept-practice is the idea of *vyayama*. The word comes from the root meaning ‘to uncover’ or ‘to extricate’. Effort is needed to extricate one’s true self or being from the distortions brought about by lack of awareness and training. The *Gita* (2015, Ch.3, verse 38) says: “*Dhumena avriyate vahni, yathadarsho malena cha.....tatha tenedam avritam*”, meaning, ‘as fire is obscured by smoke and the mirror is covered with dust’...thus is our true nature hidden from us. Right effort, like right health, is an integral notion aimed at bringing about transformative changes in various nodes and centers of the body and the being. In order to dig out of colonial modernity, the subject has to find strength at all levels to deny the path dependencies that have become ingrained in

him as reality. It is the task of *vyayama* to create an adequate vehicle for transformation at the physical, mental, psychic, and spiritual levels. As for the constituents of *vyayama*, it depends much on the *sadhaka* or seeker and her/his constitution. Each constitution will require specific kind of *vyayama* for it to become a vehicle of non-contradiction. To give an example, some may require the discipline of *yoga*, and yet for others such exertions may be superfluous. Their *prarabdha* or accumulated past may require of them a different kind of effort. But one thing is certain, physical effort and physical labor is central to native ideas of transformative learning. Merely to sit and study books is not enough. One must be close to nature taking part in various activities of self-sustenance including the growing of food and the production of other necessities where possible and with humility that brings us close to the earth (Gandhi, 1951).

### Outside Modernity

If the reader is concerned that most of the ideas and praxis presented above seem to lean towards the non-secular, I must hasten to clarify that in most indigenous thinking there is no clear line between the secular and the non-secular. This division itself is the product of modernity that has created havoc among autochthonous populations. In native perception, the bundle of energy/consciousness called the human flows into things and vice versa through a variety of mechanisms, animisms, totems, rituals etc. (Jung, 1970). Education can only participate in this cosmic exchange. Instead when education becomes directed at market relations divested of its cosmic angle, a large part of the indigenous life is taken away replaced by dead things and necrophiliac relations. Then truly the local becomes the victim of the global. As for the praxis, it generates a different atmosphere that is able to connect with the native psyche at an intimate level since it is one's own subterranean pulse to which one is once more connected. It raises the level of being all around within which the curriculum becomes a living curriculum released from dead categories and deadening divisions. The praxeological elements move us toward a recollection and recuperation of innate sources independent of the oppression of the outer apparatuses. One begins to become the author of one's own liberation.

It must be obvious that the foregoing practices are not for the student alone; the teacher must necessarily follow the above codes, precepts and practices at the same time. In other words, the praxis denies the usual division between teacher and the taught. A continuum is intrinsic to its vision. In the absence of the above, schooling and pedagogy will turn out to be, in Upanishadic language, a case of '*andhenaiva niyamana yathandhaha*' or the blind leading the blind (*Isha*, 2014).

The praxis as outlined above must be woven into the daily curriculum in a seamless manner with knowledge and the knower facing each other without hierarchy. In other words, who the knower is ontologically is just as important as what knowledge is epistemically.

In the above lines, I have endeavored, as briefly as possible, to delineate certain native concepts and practices that have transformative pedagogic edge, attempted to show why these are important and worth adopting for the decolonized subject, and demonstrated how such philosophical approaches might contribute towards coming out from under the colossal damage of colonial modernity. There are infinitely many other resources in the native philosophies for drawing out the living quality of education from the submerged knowledges and consciousness of colonized peoples. It is not my claim that these concept-practices by themselves can form a curriculum adequate for today's world. They do not replace the learning of physics or chemistry or economics. Rather, these can and must form the background against which we place and make sense of empirical knowledge. It is also my suggestion that only when such frameworks are adequately built that knowledge finds its proper place and does not become destructive. Colonial modernity had stolen the possibility of simple and direct fulfillment from lives by teaching to focus exclusively on market and exchange relations. Those who could follow the modernist code and exploit successfully became the inheritors of the world. The rest are reduced to being passive observers whose world is systematically stolen from beneath their feet, each hour, every day. The key word today is 'smart'; one has got to be 'smart' and modernist education is supposed to teach one to be 'smart'. But pre-colonial native thought tells us that the index of a good human being is not smartness but wholeness or non-contradictoriness. We want now to be able create an education that will give back to the ordinary human being the possibilities and potentialities that lie within her/his soul independent of mercantilist preferences and relations. It is a tall order given the circumstances of our times, but something worth attempting.

In having picked indigenous notions from one particular tradition, in this case the Hindu tradition, I ran the risk of not casting the net wide enough for emancipatory praxis, say in the direction of Sufism, or Buddhism, or other folk literature with cultural roots in India. On the other hand, the advantage is that I have been able to group the ideas and link them to each other without much difficulty that might not have been the case if it was a cross-tradition effort. Nevertheless it remains a serious limitation of this paper. Secondly, some readers will contend that the paper engages with classical concepts rather than folk practices. This is true, however, the purpose of this paper is to set a direction and it

can only serve as a dust mote in the oyster to use a metaphor. The pearl (collective awareness) is still to come, which will hopefully weave the classical and the folk in a bigger narrative of non-colonial education. Thirdly, there may be the apprehension that engaging non-secular concepts might advance certain sectarian revivalist agendas such as 'Hindutva'. My belief is that there is sufficient critical depth in the concept-practices engaged herein to expose the shallowness of sectarianism. To throw away vital, timeless notions fearing the shadow of revivalism is to throw the baby with the bathwater. Finally, traditional practices and vernacular notions have often been trapped within decadent cultures that have been dangerously unkind to women and other subjugated groups. Any attempt to engage vernacular aesthetics in education must be accompanied by an internal or immanent critique that acknowledges the above and makes the necessary effort first towards redemption of those concept-practices, freeing them from any discriminatory accretion. There is no set way to do this other than being critically aware of the dark side of things, which is to say that no matter how lofty the thought-concepts, their actual liberatory possibility lies not in successful arguments but in the actual struggle for ontological transformation.

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