Back to the Future
Category : September/October 2000
Published by Anonymous on Sep. 01, 2000

EDUCATION

Back to the Future

Indian Educator argues India's schools ignore the country's valuable legacy

Dr. V. R. Rajasekharan Pillaiis vice chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, located in Kottayam, Kerala State. As a devout Hindu, he's found himself at odds with fellow educators--Christians on one side and Marxists on the other. Especially, he laments and is trying to repair the lasting impact of Lord Maucaulay's "Minute on Education" [see page 52]. That document set a new course for Indian schools from the mid-19th century at the expense of India's traditional heritage of learning and language. Now Dr. Pillai is on the short list to become chairman of the Indian University Grants Commission, which controls all the universities in India, and stands to substantially impact the future of education. Hinduism Today correspondent Vrindavana S. Gopalakrishnan interviewed him in Kerala.

India's schools

The educational system in India is so defective that the children attending schools and colleges know more about the US president or a singer in the UK or a soccer player in Germany than about a relative living nearby. As a result, their concern for India and Indian society diminishes day by day.

Knowledge of and respect for our past is absent from the educational system transferred to us by the British.

Science and spirit, East and West

In traditional Indian systems of education, science and technology were a synthesis of spiritual as well as material things. There had never been a separation between these two in any of our thinking. But if you analyze the history of the Western system of education, particularly of science and technology, you can see that those who advocated spirituality were dead set against any form of modern science. For example, the scientists who proposed the theory of evolution were condemned by the Christian church. Similarly the person who said that the Earth was round faced the church's wrath. The result was a parallel growth in the West of science and technology on one side and Christian spirituality opposed on the other--virtually on a war footing. But in India it was never like that. Our rishis and sages were considering immense potentialities of the human mind, and there could never be a separation or isolation between the spiritual and the material aspects. The development of the mind came up with the development of the physical surroundings and living conditions of the entire population. No other system of education or system of philosophy has considered the potentialities of the human mind in such a vast perspective. Not only the human mind, but the entire cosmos was included, the entire ecology--all systems, both living and non-living. Today scientists are looking toward the Indian philosophy and Vedic system as part of finding new, holistic, enlightened paradigms of development.

His Swadeshi Science Movement

I founded SSM to promote and propagate the swadeshi [the Gandhian concept of using India's own resources] spirit in science and technology activities. This does not mean that we should ignore scientific development elsewhere. The synergy of our ancient knowledge, our modern science and technology and the participation of the masses will equip us to create a better future.

His view of the global village

In the modern system of education, apart from the tension between the spiritual and material, there is another tension now. There is thinking that the world is shrinking into a global village. Because of the fact that the distance between continents is decreasing with the advent of new modes of transportation and communication, they say that your village will be a cross-section of the entire globe. In this village there will be representatives of all cultures, all thoughts. But how is one to live in such a multi-cultural village, multi-cultural world? That challenge is what the modern sociologists and social scientists are talking about. But in India we have imbibed this for ages. There has long been a mixture of cultures and thoughts. Centuries ago our sages wrote, "The world is one family" (vasudaiva kutumbakam). But now, how can one become part of this economic and commercial global village unless we preserve our own village? Does going global mean that I should forego my local concerns, local beliefs? It is not at all necessary to do so. We want these modern developments, but can encompass them only by strengthening our own local concerns, local traditions, our own roots.

Self-Identity

Similarly, there is an important tension between the

universal and individual. Everybody is thinking that it is modern only when you say that you are going to be universal. But the individual perceptions of "my beliefs, my concepts, my local concerns," cannot and should not be pushed aside, whatever else you may do. Unless and until you are your own self, you cannot become universal. First of all, I am the product of my own culture and the child of my own parents, my own language, my own traditions, my own value system. Only on that foundation can I safely and securely think globally.

Education and national respect

There is a school of thought propagated in India that if you resurrect the old systems of education, it would be counter-productive, anti-modern. Macaulay argued in this vein a century and a half ago. But it is not at all true. Only when you have self respect of your own systems will you be able to contribute to the universal society. It is very evident if you consider the systems of education in the pre- and post-colonial period in India. During the pre-independent period we had great scientists like Dr. C.V. Raman and J.D. Bose and litterateurs like Rabindra Natha Tagore. They were very effective in their own fields, and at the same time they had a nationalist feeling. Actually that nationalist feeling helped them to achieve excellence. In the post-independent period, even though we are second to none in intelligence, none has achieved the level of excellence of those great men. The only reason for this is that Indians have a feeling that they have nothing to do for this country. This is again due to the lack of self-respect. The Indian scientists and technocrats working for multinationals and foreign governments are given to understand that the system in India is outmoded. Such a false belief is imbibed by the students, for which I would blame the education system. If we had concentrated on Indian values,

Indian traditions, and Indian systems, and acquired an Indian education, then we should have obtained a feeling of self-respect and nationalism. For that we have to create a feeling of national importance. Once we create an atmosphere in the country where young minds can boldly say, "We work for this country, and our systems are good," then this country has a future. Right from the pre-primary we have to change accordingly. Probably we contribute more to the development of science and technology of foreign countries than to our own.

Hinduism

The contribution of the Hindu religion to the development of mankind is immense, whereas the contribution of modern science is just a fraction of it. All the Western advancements and scientific developments were based on the Indian traditional systems. Some of them are the manifestations of Indian traditional thinking. Some of the major scientists have admitted that in physical analysis they stop at a stage where they have to go back to Indian systems. Those responsible for ruling India for the last five decades had utter disregard for the Indian and Hindu ways of life and Hindu systems of thinking which existed from time immemorial. In the past everybody was proud to say he or she was Indian. Whenever you read about Indian culture it is all about education and increase of knowledge, whether it is earthly or Vedic knowledge. If you read our own shastras and puranas, it is all completely education. But during the colonial period all these were hidden and it was propagated that they were not good, but counterproductive, obsolete, etc.