Towards the Holistic Development of a Child: Some Reflections from the Writings of Tagore, Aurobindo and Krishnamurti

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Abstract   *This paper attempts to explicate the ways in which three important Indian thinkers- Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and Krishnamurti understand the holistic development of a child. These thinkers become even more important in light of the fact that despite periodic changes in the education policies of the state, and the changing view of how a child's development in school is visualised, the thoughts of these thinkers have, in a sense remained eternal and have continued to inspire schools and find expression. Their ideas present to us very unique and refreshing ways of looking at childhood and the role of the school. Rather than moving from the theoretical ideas presented by these thinkers to their pedagogical implications, the discussion in the paper would proceed from describing the practices in these schools and then explaining their theoretical bases. The primary focus in the paper is on the holistic development of a child's personality and re-thinking assessment practices in school.*

Introduction

The structure and spirit of modern liberal education is rooted in the understanding that the child is to be kept at the centre of educational planning and practice. However, the dominant practices in school education belie this supposition since the focus continues to be on formal learning, through which students are trained to seek what may be labelled as 'objective knowledge' from books, teachers, computer programmes, or internet. Further, since the spectrum of subjects to be studied is very vast, the school years are spent by the child in just assimilating objective knowledge in different subjects. This objective knowledge is then usually tested by 'objective' measures of assessment to arrive at an 'objective' conclusion about whether the child has learnt or not.

In this scenario, aesthetics, criticality, creativity, empathy, self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, and care are some aspects of a child that do not find any space in the classroom, probably because it is difficult to translate them into measurable cognitive-behavioural objectives. They are at present referred to as co-scholastic aspects of learning, implying that they cannot be learnt, studied, or known in 'scholarly ways', and as if they are secondary in importance to the scholastic aspects of schooling like doing mathematics, science and knowing the history of the world. This division of educational activities into categories like curricular and co-curricular, and scholastic and co-scholastic establishes a hierarchy of disciplines, the notion of a child as a summation of parts and also provides insights into what the school thinks is *worth* learning.

The relegation of the more humane aspects of life to a position of lesser importance, is also probably a result of market forces impacting school education in today's world. They have commercialised the schooling process and commodified the child. As a result, learning has become synonymous with achievement and performance, reflected through objective indicators like marks, percentiles, ranks, etc, in the score cards of children. In fact the marks obtained by children across subjects have become

the indicators of *quality* in education and assessment has become the focal activity of educational institutions. Various kinds of assessment tools and schedules have begun to get designed, ostensibly based on criteria that are claimed to be rational, objective, and impartial. In the name of the various *innovative* assessment methods being promoted as part of school practices, the learning experiences of children are being reduced to cognitive and behavioural domains as they are amenable to standardized assessment. Thus, 'meritocratic individualism' (Hargreaves, 1980) seems to form the basis of the assessment mechanisms followed by schools. Here, individual performances and competition form the core of the educational process. Though conceptualized to facilitate learning, slowly and gradually these assessment tools start determining the conceptualization, organization, and practices of the classroom. It seems that "the tail of the test wags the body of the curriculum" (Apple & Beane, 2006, p. 10) and the teachers are now encouraged to engage in 'teaching to the test' that implies that "teachers are doing something special to help students do well on a test, often without helping them to better understand the underlying subject matter" (Firestone & Schorr, 2004, p. 2).

This paper intends to break the myth that meritocratic individualism is essential for a successful educational system. It presents a description of a few practices in schools based on the ideas of Krishnamurti, Sri Aurobindo, and Tagore, particularly with reference to the child's holistic development. Since the paper focuses on assessment practices and their interface with children's development, the subsequent discussion focuses on the ways of assessment that are used in the three institutions and some important issues about children's holistic development that emerge from them.

Mirambika, SAICE, and the Integral child in the thought of Sri Aurobindo

The Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education (SAICE) was established in the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry in 1943. Mirambika came into being in 1981 inside the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Complex in New Delhi. Both
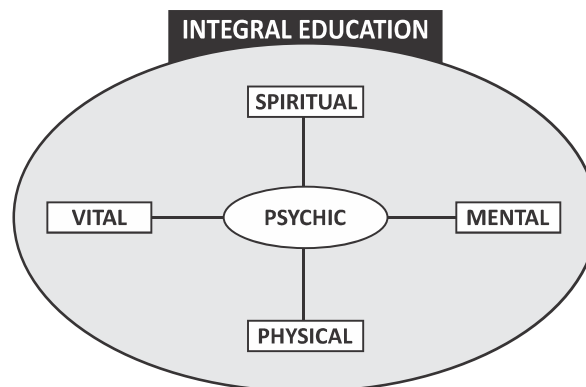
SAICE and Mirambika school are entrenched in the Integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, which aims at an integral development of a child, i.e. one that unifies the development of the various aspect of the self. The various aspects of Integral development of the child can be summarised in the adjoining diagram. Assessment and evaluation are not viewed as something terrifying and stressful and neither are they a one-time activity but a part of their everyday life that the students themselves feel are important. For the students in the Integral education system, evaluation is all about finding spaces for self-affirmation as well as self-improvement. Students "are not passive recipients of knowledge... rather they actively seek intellectual stimulation..." (Baniwal, 2012, p. 246).

In the spirit of the three principles of Integral education by Sri Aurobindo, i.e. 'nothing can be taught', 'move from near to far', and 'the mind has to be consulted in its own growth', assessment and evaluation are " continuous processes, with emphasis on evaluating competence and the development of qualities... Evaluation is looked upon as part of a process, of self-awareness where one comes to one's weakness and strengths, capacities and qualities and takes responsibility for one's personal growth" (Passi, 1997, p. 64).

The various, "self-referenced assessments in the school are not related to grading, ranking, certification or upward mobility of classes... Evaluations are descriptive assessments providing a comprehensive profile of the child." (Sibia, 2006, pp. 83-84). Therefore, the children are encouraged to record, observe, and reflect while undertaking different activities. This nature of evaluation being

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diagnostic, both participatory and individualised, and promoting self-understanding self-awareness changes the attitudes of both the children and their teachers (whom they lovingly call diyas, a combination of *didi* and *bhaiya*).

It is also not essential that the assessment and evaluation are carried out individually; they can be sometimes "done by children in groups" and at times "jointly by teachers and children" (Sibia, 2004). These group and joint collaborative efforts during assessments and evaluations "are influenced by the school philosophy, which stresses the undesirability of comparisons and competition among students in any of the school processes" (Sibia, 2004). The assessment and evaluation system, in Integral Education thought, "gives positive feedback, is diagnostic and helps students to understand what has to be strengthened and identify the next goals in the learning process" (NCERT, 2005, p. 14). It is not seen as something threatening; a mistake is looked upon as something that helps to find out where more attention is needed (Passi, 1997, p. 64).

The intention of their assessment practices, as teachers in Mirambika believe, is not to "assess the child to show his weaknesses, but to show him how much he has learnt" (Sibia, 2004). The attempt is to let the child know how much s/he has learnt during the process. Thus, there are no tests, marks, and grades in these schools, yet "assessment is multi-dimensional. No child fails- there is never any need" (Mehrotra, 2007, p. 33).

The evaluation methods are intricately connected with teaching methods. The main teaching method is project work, which is carried out by children as research and a number of resources are provided to them for this. Though no specific books are prescribed, project specific books and dictionaries are kept in the classroom for the use of children whenever required. The library is consulted and other resource rooms like the computer room, science lab, biology lab and activity room are used by children as and when needed. The project work may include one or more of the activities mentioned above like drama, dance, music, art, craft, films, excursions, research and investigation. There is ample space for the emotive development of the students. They are immensely self-reflective in reference to students of their age from conventional schools. They keep a note of their feelings, emotions, and thoughts even during their everyday activities (Baniwal, 2012, p. 244). The project work is then documented electronically, or in the form of charts, files, models etc. The documentation is followed by presentations, discussions, applications etc. on which the other children and *diyas* give their feedback and the evaluation is based on the feedback. The information is expected to be assimilated and utilized and integrated with the previous information. The whole process aims at self-striving towards perfection through self-improvement.

If one were to write in brief about the salient features of the 'Free Progress System', then the following words of Prof. Kireet Joshi (1970) best describe them:

"The structure is oriented towards the meeting of the varied needs of the students, each one of whom has his own special problems of development";

"the aspiration, the need for growth, experience of freedom, possibility of educating oneself, self-experimentation, discovery of the inner needs and their relation with the programme of studies, and the discovery of the aim of life and the art of life" are all valued and given space in the institution

"In the system, each student is free to study any subject he chooses at any given time; but this freedom has to be guided; the student should experience freedom; ... the student has therefore to be watched with care, sympathy and wisdom; the teacher must be a friend and a guide, must not impose himself, but may intervene when necessary".

"A great stress falls upon the individual work by the students".

Studies, like (Pathak, 2002), (Sailaja, 2002), (Sibia, 2006), (Baniwal, 2012) have repeatedly affirmed that in the free-progress schools rooted in the Integral philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, holistic development of children is a reality.

The School, The Valley School, Rajghat Besant School, Sahyadri School, and the free child in

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the thought of J. Krishnamurti

One of the important thinkers of the twentieth century, who refused to systematize and be systematised was Jiddu Krishnamurti. There are many schools that are managed by the Krishnamurti Foundation of India, which are spread across India. Established at different times, it is of great intellectual interest to understand how an institution like school, which needs a system, can be built on the foundations of Krishnamurti's thought that defies any systematization; and to witness the myriad ways in which freedom, a concept central to Krishnamurti's thought, has found space within school, especially in the context of evaluation.

Focusing on assessment and evaluation, which are the focus of this paper, one finds that in a Krishnamurti school, comparison of one child with another and therefore in evaluation is resisted. The various assessment tasks might include "projects, assignments, classroom presentations- testing an array of abilities, rather than just memory" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 142). Parents' assessment of the learning of their own child is also considered significant in KFI schools. "In September parents send a report to school on their children based on the observation made at home. This report facilitates a joint awareness and understanding of the child by the school and home" (The School KFI Website, 2016). Parents receive such reports twice in an academic year. Thus, there is a systematic and continuous assessment of students' progress which is non-comparative yet comprehensive and it is also able to point towards possibilities for growth.

The teacher is "not evaluating in order to compare one child with another or to rank them or to hold one child as an ideal for another child to imitate or follow" (Krishna, 2001). Evaluation is not about judging the child but it is "a description of the present state of development of that child" (Krishna, 2001), physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Following Krishnamurti's ideas, these schools encourage cooperation rather than competition, fraternity rather than rivalry, respect rather than hierarchy or domination.

Further, to develop sensitivity, calmness of mind, focus, and a reflective attitude. "sessions are held to learn self-understanding and to appreciate the value of silence" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 142). Various contemporary social issues are discussed in the classes with diverse pedagogies like "group learning, films, debates and library research; there is a strong emphasis on developing the senses and learning directly from nature" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 142).

The intent here is to develop the whole being rather than only one or few aspects of it. Prolonged engagements with different disciplines like fine arts, sports, music, theatre, literature, science, nature, and addressing children's curiosities are the stepping stones towards a life that is lived with wisdom, depth, and compassion for others. Thus, in Krishnamurti schools, "while developing the students' intellectual faculties, there is a conscious effort towards creating a wider awareness of the world and giving space for the development of the aesthetic, moral and emotional dimensions" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 142).

Every possible attempt is made to provide an atmosphere of freedom to the student. For example, "in Classes IV to VIII, the curriculum encourages observation, working with one's hands, enquiry, reflection and creative expression" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 198). In senior classes, students take a lot of responsibility for the school as well as of the surrounding areas of the school. They are expected to organise and participate in the various clubs and activities; "to name a few—film club, writers' forum, reporters' club, reading club, listening club, cosmos club, music and theatre club, sketching club, papier-mâché, macramé, conversations about life, cooking club and handyman club" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 198). They also participate in programmes designed for the benefit of surrounding areas, nature as well as villages.

Since, KFI schools are till standard XII, thus, unlike Mirambika, in order to get admissions in higher education courses the "KFI students take the public examinations at the end of tenth and twelfth

standard" (The School KFI Website, 2016). To make their students at ease with such exams, term-end examinations are held after standard VIII. The students are not afraid of these exams and these are also conducted in ways that make them spaces for reflection, expression of one's thoughts, critical reflection, and a continued dialogue with oneself and the world.

Patha Bhavan and the 'Whole Child' in the thought of Rabindranath Tagore

Tagore's school, Brahmacharyashram, was established in 1901 in Shantiniketan. It was later renamed Patha Bhavana in 1925. In the natural settings of this school, the aim of education, for Tagore, was for one to become a 'total man', as "one who thinks of himself first and foremost as a human being… irrespective of his socio-economic placing, of his caste, creed and religion" (Gupta, 2005, p. 29). This spirit is clearly reflected in the prayer 'Where the mind is without fear' from Gitanjali (1912).

Tagore envisioned "his students to think in terms of the whole of mankind. He wanted them to become universal men and women like himself and to overcome feelings of narrow nationalism in order that the world could live and grow in peace and fellowship" (Jha, 1994, p. 11). He rejected any sort of boundary that is imposed on human mind by any other human being. "He was one of the first in India to argue against the colonisation of human thoughts in evolving an educational system that aims at freedom of mind in a rural backdrop, away from confining structures and in close proximity with natural elements" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 255).

Patha Bhavana strives to set an example in teaching standards by following an innovative curriculum of joyful learning, which aims to inspire the creative and scientific temperament of the children" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 256). In place of the prevailing curriculum that emphasised on students to pass through examinations in order to secure some kind of job, he conceived of a curriculum "that would have the inbuilt ideas of surplus, variety, depth and utility. He wanted the curriculum to be related to daily life

by which students would be able to address the situations that they encountered" (Bhattacharya, 2014, p. 49).

In Patha Bhavan, there are no annual examinations and competition is also not encouraged among students. "Students from Class VIII sit for 'Practice Examination' sessions to test their abilities in writing examination papers, which helps them in the secondary examination" (Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj, 2007, p. 256), which is akin to the practice in KFI schools. However, even in these examinations, the spirit is quite different from the conventional system, which is reflected in the following words of a former student:

> "The system of examination too was quite innovative; the teachers would give out the questions and we could sit wherever we wanted; there was no system of invigilation. I had tried to take advantage of the situation but was rebuked by my classmate that this would be breaking the trust that the teachers had placed on us".

> (Jana, 2012, Translation cited in Bhattacharya, 2014, p.51)

One can see that Tagore was not concerned with intellectual development alone, but also the development of morals and character. Education must also be able to "develop a student's aesthetic nature and creativity"(Jha, 1994, p. 10). Here the concern is not only with the problems and challenges of life but the whole life, its meaning, the freedom to live it to the fullest, and to express one's creative potential. It was about the surplus, the beyond, transcending one's immediacy and become ever more human, ever more whole.

Concluding Remarks: Altering the 'Main-Stream'

From the discussions in the previous sections, it becomes clear that assessment and evaluation practices need to be an integral aspect of the teaching-learning process, but need not be rooted in cut-throat competition and in a form that threatens students and make them quit institutional education. The following are some ways in which

our mainstream schools can learn from the experiments of the three alternative schools described above, to make learning and evaluation an engagement rather than an imposition:

The Idea of Education and its Implications for Defining Assessment and Evaluation

Researchers like Vittachi, Raghavan, & Raj (2007) assert that the polar understanding of education as "either competitive and examination-oriented, as in mainstream schools, or learning at your own pace, and not necessarily doing well in exams … The apparent tension between the two approaches, of pulling in opposite directions, we found to be irrelevant" (p. 133). These two understandings need to be unified by providing spaces of learning, exploration, and personal engagement to the students, for which the role of teachers, the ways of assessment, and parents' attitudes need reorientation.

Importance of the Teacher

The popular image of a teacher in a mainstream school as a meek dictator (Kumar, 2005), needs to be re-defined as an experienced partner in the learning process. The teacher is the first one to know and encounter the various curiosities, creative talents, and interests of a child and then helps to nurture them and take them ahead. Students' sense of freedom, empowerment, decision making, confidence, and various other forms of affirmations are quite often derived from how their teachers engage with them. In this regard, there is a lot that can to be done in mainstream schools.

Experimentation with Assessment and Evaluation mechanisms

One of the major concern of schools is to standardise assessment mechanism in order to present a comparative report cards of students of a class. Parents must be made aware of individualised assessment reports with qualitative feedback rather than a quantified conclusion in marks or grades. Simple assessment activities may work wonderfully in classrooms but the teacher needs to be trusted and educated before such experiments can be carried out. For example,

"many a teacher will admit readily, it is far tougher to ask good questions than to answer them well. Alternative schools constantly experiment with assessment techniques so as to allow room for creativity, variety and individuality in evaluation" (Raghavan, 2007, p. 51). Similarly, peer assessment or self-assessment can also be used as a great way of understanding one's strengths and shortcomings. Rather than increasing standardisation and automatization of assessment systems, "if national examination policies demanded such innovations in the internal examinations of schools, this could trigger critical thinking and decrease the overwhelming fear of examinations that now cripples students" (Raghavan, 2007, p. 51).

Emphasise the Emotional and the Spiritual

Assessment methods and the understanding of education are interdependent. Schools using alternative pedagogies or organizational structures re-define the idea of education and of an educated person, which they constantly strive to realise. These ideas become the spirit and guiding forces of all school practices. In this context, mainstream schools, thus, need to find their own spirit rather than move with the flow of the market.

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