

Dharampal's Vision on the Need for an Indigenous System of Education: An Analysis

Mahendra Nath Mishra¹, Dr. Anuj Kumar Mishra², Avanish Kumar Mishra³, Preeti Pandey⁴

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, PPN PG College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: mahendranathmishra786@gmail.com

² Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, PPN PG College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: anujkumarm38@gmail.com

³ Research Scholar, Department of Law, V.S.S.D. College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: avanish1995mishra@gmail.com

⁴ Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, PPN PG College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: preetipandey935@gmail.com

Abstract

India has a long and rich history of educational development. Indian education traditionally adopted both formal and informal forms. From ancient times, education was accessible to people across different sections of society and was intended to make the individual, society, and nation self-reliant. Prajna, Shila, and Samadhi were regarded as its core values. Education was not confined to teaching and learning within schools; an individual also learned from the family, society, and nature. However, the British attempted to destroy this rich system through their policies and introduced English as the medium of education. As a result, people became distanced from their values, traditions, arts, and skills. Since education became expensive, access to education increasingly became concentrated among the higher classes. Dharampal attempted to demonstrate that if India is to become strong and self-reliant and build a robust nation, education based on Indian values must be restored. This requires collective efforts by individuals, families, and society. This, according to the argument, would represent India's own form of modernity, distinct from Western modernity...

Keywords: Dharampal, Education, Decline of Education, Restoration of Indian Education Introduction and Research Problem.

Introduction

Among all living beings on Earth, the human child is the most dependent. At the beginning of life, a child cannot walk independently, eat or drink without assistance, or even communicate its needs adequately to others. While the offspring of many other species become physically capable and self-reliant relatively quickly, a human child's life remains dependent on parental care for a long period. Yet, when the child becomes an adult, education and knowledge enable the human being to exercise remarkable influence over the world. Human beings travel across land, sky, and water and can accurately calculate the distances of planets and stars millions of miles away. It is education that makes human beings knowledgeable and reflective, clearly distinguishing them from other sentient beings. Through education, individuals develop physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually, and determine their appropriate place in society. Humanity transfers its accumulated knowledge and experience from one generation to another through education.

It is therefore natural to ask: What is education? The English word 'education' is derived from the Latin term 'educatum,' which includes the elements 'e' and 'duco.' 'E' means from within outward, while 'duco' means to lead forward. Thus, education is the means through which a person first develops internally and then develops externally. From the perspective of Hindi word formation, the word 'shiksha' originates from the Sanskrit root 'shiksh,' meaning to learn. In other Indian languages too, education is associated with knowledge and learning.

When education is viewed from a narrow perspective, it is understood as the act of study and teaching carried out within a particular educational institution during a specific period. In this formal structure, teachers provide students with a prescribed curriculum at a particular place and time. Such formal education often gives insufficient attention to the practical skills required for living a meaningful human life; obtaining a qualification becomes the primary objective.

The broader perspective of education is informal, in which human beings continue learning from their surroundings throughout life. Ramnath Sharma (2008) states that education is not confined to a school or classroom; it is also acquired through the family, various institutions and associations of society (Sharma, 2008)..

Education is imparted not only by teachers but also by people of different ages and genders and even by nature. Therefore, education cannot be restricted to schooling or a fixed curriculum.

Research Questions

What are Indian education and its values according to Dharampal?

How does the Indian system of education differ from Western education?

Which colonial policies attempted to undermine Indian education?

What were the objectives behind the establishment of Western education in India?

How can Indian education be restored?

Research Methodology

Archival Analysis: Re-reading the British documents cited by Dharampal.

Discourse Analysis: Analysis of colonial documents.

Reinterpretation of Dharampal's works.

Theoretical Perspective

Dharampal incorporates both formal and informal perspectives in his conception of education. Through this approach, a person learns not only from the school curriculum but also from the surrounding environment. In his speech delivered at the National Council for Teacher Education, Dharampal explains his understanding of Indian education: young boys and girls should become familiar with the plants, insects, animals, and birds around them; with ponds, rivers, wells, and the earth; with soil and its nature; with local arts and production activities; and ultimately with their village or neighbourhood, its institutions, roads, shops, and the people with whom they live. After understanding their immediate surroundings, children can understand that thousands of similar villages and neighbourhoods exist in a district, that a district is a small unit of a state, and that a state is a small part of India. The objective of this educational philosophy is to reconnect human beings with one another and with nature. Such connectedness can foster a sense of belonging and help address poverty, hunger, unemployment, and environmental crises while strengthening national unity.

The Buddhist scholar 'Rinpoche' distinguishes Western education from Indian education by arguing that Western education primarily involves the exchange of information, whereas Indian education seeks to refine human intelligence. He states that reading and writing, arithmetic, arts, and vocational knowledge alone do not constitute education; education consists of Shila, Samadhi, and Prajna. Through Shila, a person follows ethical principles, distinguishes right from wrong, and disciplines life. When individual life becomes disciplined, social life also becomes disciplined, encouraging compassion, kindness, and altruism. Samadhi refers to disciplining the mind, because the mind guides human conduct. Prajna enables a person to attain genuine knowledge and understand the nature of the world while recognizing human welfare as inseparable from one's own welfare.

Indian educational values differ from Western values. Western education is presented here as encouraging consumerism and attempting to place nature under human control, while Indian education seeks to establish balance among human beings, society, and nature. Indian education is broader in scope than Western education. Nevertheless, some Indian scholars influenced by Western modernity and colonial thinking have argued that the spread of education in India began only after the arrival of the British. According to this interpretation, the colonial powers understood that India could not be effectively ruled as long as Indians remained connected with their ideas, values, and traditions. Therefore, they introduced their own educational system in order to separate Indians from their cultural roots. Pawan Gupta, in his lecture on the 'beautiful tree' of Indian education, argues that colonial powers understood that if India remained connected to its roots, Europe would not be able to surpass it; therefore, India had to be separated from its roots. A. K. Coomaraswamy (1981) similarly describes the colonial mindset (Coomaraswamy, 1981), arguing that the modern education that the British proudly introduced into India was based on the assumption that India was a wild and uncivilized country that it was Britain's divine duty to civilize.

Development of Education in India

Ancient Period

Education in India has developed since very ancient times. During this period, education was provided through institutions such as ashrams, gurukuls, and monasteries. These institutions were sustained through collective social support and were largely independent of state control. In ancient India, education was independent of external control by the state, government, or political groups. One of the principal duties of kings was to ensure that learned scholars could pursue their studies and perform their responsibility of imparting knowledge without external obstruction. Students lived with their teachers and received education in subjects such as the Vedas, Puranas, astronomy, and philosophy. These studies connected students with their traditions and encouraged disciplined living. Education was also provided in agriculture, warfare, animal husbandry, handicrafts, and other practical skills. Although the ancient social system was structured around varna, educational provisions also existed for different occupational groups, including those engaged in handicrafts. Gurukul education paid special attention to mental, physical, and spiritual development. Women also had access to education in ancient India, and several women became philosophers and scholars. After completing gurukul education, the student underwent the

'Samavartana' ceremony, through which the student was made aware of responsibilities toward family, community, and society.

Medieval Period

During the medieval period, social harmony began to weaken. The caste system increasingly replaced the earlier varna framework, and caste discrimination and untouchability created divisions among people. To challenge such discrimination, Buddhist institutions provided education without discrimination. At the time of entering a Buddhist monastery, a student took vows to abstain from falsehood, untimely eating, luxurious living, slander, intoxication, and attachment to valuable possessions. These monasteries taught Sanskrit, Pali, logic, astronomy, astrology, Ayurveda, handicrafts, and other subjects, with local languages also used as media of instruction.

Muslim Period

During Muslim rule, rulers also established educational arrangements. The objective of education in this period was to develop religious commitment among Muslims. Education was provided in maktabas attached to mosques, where students learned the Persian script and studied verses from the Quran. Texts such as Sikandarnama, Gulistan, and Bostan were also taught. After elementary maktab education, students could enter madrasas for higher education, where they studied Islamic law, history, geography, Arabic, Persian, grammar, mathematics, Greek medicine, astrology, agriculture, and subjects connected with everyday life. Education was regarded as a social responsibility, and individuals contributed through donations.

Education in India and Britain Just Before British Rule

When the British arrived in India, they recognized that effective colonial rule required changes in the existing social structure. They therefore planned to alter India's educational system. Dharampal (2007), on the basis of his research, attempted to compare the level of education in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with that in India and to examine the policies through which Indian education was weakened. He examined how Indians were distanced from their traditional knowledge of justice, law, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, and crafts and how the British system was introduced.

Dharampal (2007) describes the educational system of sixteenth-century England as one in which access to education was largely restricted to higher social groups. Reading the Bible publicly or privately was, according to the cited account, largely limited to the privileged classes and landowners. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, changes occurred in the English educational system, including the establishment of charitable schools for poorer children, where religious education was provided. These charitable schools continued in the form of Sunday schools until around 1790. A. E. Dobbs (1919) writes that by 1834 the curriculum of national schools remained largely limited to religious instruction, reading, writing, and arithmetic, while in some rural schools writing was avoided because of fears of undesirable consequences. Following the 1802 legislation associated with the Peel reforms, efforts were made to expand day schools. General access to education gradually became more possible in Britain.

Accounts of William Adam, Thomas Munro and Dr. Leitner

Alongside his study of English education, Dharampal (2007) examined the educational system of eighteenth-century India on the basis of British records. Surveys conducted after the establishment of British rule to identify weaknesses in Indian education provide information about the educational system between 1820 and 1840. India's traditional educational system operated through pathshalas, gurukuls, and madrasas. These institutions were not limited to religious education and were generally sustained through social support rather than direct government control. William Adam reported that during the 1830s and 1840s there were approximately one hundred thousand pathshalas in the villages of Bengal and Bihar. This suggests a wide geographical distribution of schools.

Similarly, Thomas Munro described education in the Madras Presidency and stated that a school existed in every village. Dharampal notes, in relation to education in the Madras Presidency, that the number of students from Shudra communities was greater than the number from the twice-born communities, indicating broad access to education. Subjects taught in the pathshalas included the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata, Vishvakarma Purana, Bhavapurana, Kankaya, Girija Kalyana, Panchatantra, Vetala Panchavimshati, Mahatarangini, dictionaries, and works on grammar.

Higher education was provided in aghahams, where students studied mathematics, the Vedas, astronomy, ethics, and related subjects. Aghahams could be organized in the homes of scholars and were supported by land grants that helped meet students' daily needs. Scholarships were also available for poor students. Learned Brahmin scholars taught subjects such as Dharmashastra, law, and astronomy without charging fees.

William Adam claimed that Bengal and Bihar contained approximately 150,748 villages, of which at least about 100,000 had schools. Bengal also had arrangements for higher education, often organized in the homes of respected individuals, where the local community collectively supported students' food, accommodation, clothing, and other needs. These institutions taught Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Odia, and other languages. Adam's survey found teachers and students from diverse social groups, including Brahmins, Kayasthas, Sadgops, and even members of communities that had been socially marginalized.

Dr. Leitner, discussing education in Punjab, stated that when Punjab came under British control, there were approximately 330,000 students in schools of different levels who could read, write, and perform basic calculations. He further reported that, thirty or forty years earlier, thousands of students had studied literature, jurisprudence, logic, philosophy, and Ayurveda at advanced levels in Arabic and Sanskrit colleges. Dharampal uses such evidence to argue that while ordinary people in England had limited access to education, education in India had a broad social base. Ashok Modak (Modak, 2023; 2023) similarly writes that while ordinary English people were living in educational darkness between 1542 and 1802, India's educational system was flourishing.

Decline of Indian Education

The question therefore arises: If Indian education was so developed, how did it decline? To understand this, it is necessary to examine the colonial attitude toward India. The argument presented by the author is that British colonial policy sought either to assimilate other societies into its own model or to weaken institutions that resisted it. Indian Denton, an English official, is cited as an example of this colonial tendency in relation to indigenous populations in North America. Similar policies, according to the argument, harmed India's educational system because education was one of the principal means through which Indians remained connected to their cultural identity.

Before British rule, each Indian village possessed a degree of local autonomy and its own sources of income. Village revenues supported education and health as priorities, while local residents also contributed to these institutions. Revenue records from the 1770s and 1790s indicate relatively low land-revenue demands. After British rule was established, however, revenue demands increased and village autonomy was weakened, affecting education. Community support for educational institutions declined. Colonial economic policies also weakened the Indian economy, which affected educational participation. A. D. Campbell is cited as arguing that the decline of education was associated with the widespread poverty that gradually spread across the country and with the reduction in the income of groups engaged in production due to European goods. During the same period, the number of students in England increased while educational participation in India declined. The figures cited in the source compare the populations and student numbers of the Madras Presidency and England and are used to illustrate this contrasting trend.

Another major factor cited in the decline of the Indian educational system was Macaulay's educational policy (Dharampal, 2007). Macaulay considered the traditional Indian educational system inadequate and sought to create a class of people who would be Indian in appearance but English in their ideas and intellect. The downward filtration process was used with the expectation that education would first reach higher social groups and later spread to the middle and general population. English was made the medium of education in place of Indian languages. As a result, education became more expensive and increasingly concentrated among higher social groups. The emphasis on English-language literature, according to the argument, distanced students from the values of Prajna, Shila, and Samadhi and encouraged consumerism. The effects of Western education are presented as contributing to social disconnection and a loss of awareness of Indian traditions, culture, history, and heritage. The example of Acharya Charaka, who is said to have declined a prestigious royal medical position in order to serve ordinary people, is contrasted with the author's contemporary observation concerning a terrorist incident dated 7 November 2025. The author argues that traditional Indian education was oriented toward human welfare, whereas colonial and Western educational models encouraged dominance and consumerism. Indumati Katdare (Katdare, 2023; 2023) is cited as arguing that this distortion affected even wealthy, intelligent, and virtuous people and that deep-rooted change in the mind is necessary before other reforms can produce meaningful results.

Restoration of Education

Western education is argued to have generated a sense of inferiority in the Indian mind. The author proposes that India's traditional indigenous system should be developed again. This effort should take place at the levels of family, society, and school. Education should be brought closer to the Indian values of Prajna, Shila, and Samadhi. Prajna should enable a person not merely to receive information but also to reflect on how knowledge can be used for human welfare. Shila should promote discipline and harmony among individuals, society, and nature. Samadhi should encourage a person to identify social welfare with personal welfare.

At the social level, measures should be adopted to ensure employment and economic security for all. When people are economically secure, they can contribute surplus resources to education, and the cost of education can also decline. Access to education should therefore be ensured for every social group. A sense of family should be restored within the educational system. Sons and daughters should receive equal opportunities, while their individual identities and capabilities should be respected. The objective should be to enable both boys and girls to develop their personalities through equal access to education. If this succeeds, the family, village, town, and ultimately the nation can become educated.

The restoration of Indian education also requires changes in school structures. Such change should emerge from within rather than being imposed externally. Lessons should be drawn from the previous two hundred years of history, and reforms should be rooted in India's own context. Teachers need to demonstrate knowledge and

courage in this process, while the government should support their efforts. The author argues that schools do not enjoy the same autonomy as families and that excessive administrative control over education can make stable policy difficult. Teachers should therefore play a stronger role in educational reform. The curriculum should integrate science, technology, computers, English, and management with culturally grounded studies of history, sociology, religious traditions, and related Indian knowledge systems.

Traditional Indian education was supported by a strong local economy. This raises the question of whether education or the economy should be transformed first. Since each affects the other, changes should occur simultaneously; however, the author argues that education should receive priority because people who are properly educated can transform other institutions. Education should also include art, crafts, and skill development so that individuals can become self-reliant.

An important element in restoring Indian education should be education in the mother tongue. When a foreign language becomes the medium of instruction, its literature and cultural values can also become dominant in the curriculum. The author argues that the adoption of English as the medium of education contributed to distance from Indian values and traditions and from knowledge traditions such as the Vedas, Upanishads, philosophy, Jain and Buddhist traditions, Ayurveda, astronomy, mathematics, and crafts. English has increasingly become associated with scholarship and intellectual status. Therefore, mother-tongue education should be strengthened so that students do not have to master another language before gaining knowledge of a subject. Educational materials in Indian languages should be developed not only for the humanities but also for science, engineering, medicine, management, and other disciplines. Although this is difficult, the author argues that it is necessary to begin the process so that India can move beyond dependence on Western modernity and develop a form of modernity grounded in Indian values. This, according to the argument, can contribute to the reconstruction of society and the nation..

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