

Whither Modernity? Musings on an Alternative Paradigm for Education

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Abstract

The paper, primarily through a historical retrospection attempts to locate the skill or knowledge development initiative in the contemporary era and proceeds to identify a few of its implications. Such a historical perspective, by and large, focuses on the views of Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault, both of whom have been essentially concerned about how the nature of skill and learning development impacts human life. The two centuries that separate their essays with almost uniform title, and not to speak of a host of essays with the same title during the period, have only added greater urgency to the issue. While Kant exudes confidence and hails the Enlightenment project, Foucault is skeptical or even alerts one to the damaging historical effect of the pursuit of knowledge on human life. Foucault, through his genealogical and archeological analysis, demonstrates how our knowledge production has led to the sacrifice of human subject. Notably, Foucault's sense of disappointment, far from being an isolated sentiment has come to define the mood of the discreet academic community globally. In this context, how far the failure of western modernity could be a lesson to be learned for the rest of the world, including India, needs to be explored. The question whether India has been better or worse off, having remained somewhat insulated from western modernity, gains greater significance in the age of postmodernity. Even as skill development can by no means, be by passed, one needs to seriously address its nature and its cost. Could we think of an India- specific, if hybridized, paradigm of skill development model?

No worthy deliberation on Skill development and higher education can be done independent of the aims one sets for higher education either in the form of an ultimate purpose or an immediate one. The ultimate purpose of all skill development higher education may be viewed under two parameters, namely,

i) Human (and nonhuman) happiness and welfare.

ii) Sustainability.

A viable initiative will necessarily have to address these two issues, even as the perspectives regarding what makes for happiness and what does not, may differ substantially.

Besides, any meaningful programme that is chalked will have to be based on lessons that we have learned from history. Borges, following Cervantes, calls “History, the mother of truth!”, and then goes on to define “history not as *delving into* reality but as the very *fount* of reality”. Evidently, one has to assign, like Borges does, prime role to history in the production of truth and knowledge. Accordingly, this paper attempts a discussion on skill development in the broad context of history as the fount of reality in which the two essays on the Enlightenment by Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault may be read for their bearing on the present.

Evidently, the Western world so dominated the world at large on a variety of facets of life during the modern era that there arose a widely shared, if erroneous, view that the West has come up with a viable and enduring model of skill acquisition in higher education. However, even a cursory analysis of history would convince us that this is far from true.

For instance, there is a general agreement that the present Western template of skill development through higher education had its onset with the Renaissance which was followed up by the Age of Enlightenment. One would not be wide of the mark if one says that Renaissance was by and large a passage from a God-centred universe to that of a man-centred one. The Renaissance humanism reverberated and resonated in the Western academies to such an extent that a general sense came to prevail that man is the measure of everything. That is, the worth of everything would hinge on its effects on the human person. This anthropocentric position had far reaching consequences. And it raised many questions.

Close on the heels of Renaissance was the Age of Enlightenment, which in general, came to view human being yet again as the triumphant hero of history. Significantly, the debate regarding the truth of the Enlightenment has caught the imagination of a host of thinkers in the last three centuries. The debate on the thematic of Enlightenment engages with the fundamental questions of human history, truth and knowledge. Among others, the thought of two thinkers seems to bear rather heavily on the development and knowledge. Famously, Immanuel Kant published an essay entitled “An answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” in November 1784 in the Berlin Monthly (*Berliner Monatschrift*), against an open invitation to respond to the question about the definition of Enlightenment. The two centuries that followed witnessed a profusion, and of considerable vigour, of debate on the same theme. The second half of the 20th century saw in particular the fierce polarization of the thinkers on the basis of their take on the Enlightenment project. Theoreticians like Adorno, Horkheimer, Heidegger, Bataille and particularly Derrida and Foucault were

inclined to the view that the Enlightenment project has been more or less a failure. On the other hand, Habermas and a host of the votaries of the liberal humanist persuasion, if with certain reservation, seem to have abiding faith in the Enlightenment.

Kant begins the essay with a definition: “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. . . . Dare to know! (*Sapere aude*) “Have courage to use your own understanding” is therefore the motto of the enlightenment” (<http://columbia.edu>). The heady cocktail born out of a sense of omnipotence of reason and its alleged ability to establish mastery over nature generated a widespread sense of euphoria. In popular imagination, the new scientific temper seemed to set things right for the world. There really were perceptible changes for good. Science and technology, travel and exploration, astronomy, industrial revolution, plant taxonomy, political organization, new human and social sciences and so on swept man off his feet. To imagine that we have had conquest over nature was really heady stuff. Even there was a confidence that science would see humanity go on improving and would finally establish an earthly paradise for everyone.

However, the sense of euphoria did not last long. The high expectations about a glorious era that propelled human history from the Renaissance through the Age of Enlightenment gave way to pessimism and disillusionment. Obviously, humanity came to witness a host of phenomena that unsettled all sensitive intellectuals. These discountenanced all the hopes of a heaven on earth for everyone. The rise of Nazism and fascism, the two world wars, the inequality in the distribution of wealth between the developed and underdeveloped nations, the Great Depression, Colonialism and imperialism coupled with nationalist chauvinism, cold war, poverty amidst plenty, ecological degradation and so on are but a few things that signalled that humanity was heading towards something other than paradise on earth. It powerfully drove home the sense that humanity hardly grew from barbarity and that it was inferior to even animals with regard to their deportment to their fellow creatures. The grand illusory world of civilization stood debunked. So much so that education, progress, refinement, and so on suddenly became mere hollow words.

It is against this backdrop that one should read Foucault’s essay “What is Enlightenment?” (1984) published exactly 200 hundred years after Kant’s essay evidently as an alternative vision. That Foucault returned to the theme of Enlightenment repeatedly in the last phase of his life, that he repeats Kant’s own title and that Kant’s view of Enlightenment functions as a leitmotif in Foucault’s own essay only underscores the extent to which Kant’s essay underpins Foucault’s. Foucault begins his essay with the observation that Kant’s essay introduces a crucial question of modernity involving the very ontology of ourselves. The issue gathers urgency and significance as the Enlightenment has determined at least in part,

what we are, what we think and what we do today. Above all, “What is Enlightenment” is a question that the modern philosophy is struggling to address: “modern philosophy is the philosophy that is attempting to answer the question raised so imprudently two centuries ago: *What is Enlightenment?*” (32)

Foucault refers to four areas of difficulty with Kant’s essay. Kant views the Enlightenment as one that can function effectively only by fundamentally modifying the relations among the will, reason and authority. Kant says that it is a process that is simultaneously occurring and is based on individual initiative. Kant’s essay is not very clear as to whether the Enlightenment affects the social and political existence of all humanity of the human being; and finally, as it is an individual initiative, one cannot exactly figure out the way the private use of reason would relate to the public and political realms.

Now, the question “What is Enlightenment” being synonymous with ‘what is modern philosophy?’ Foucault addresses modernity. Modernity, for Kant and Baudelaire, as it is for Foucault, is an attitude: “a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, way of thinking and feeling: a way, too, of acting and behaving, that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task” (39).

Foucault’s definition of modernity and Enlightenment does not involve a “faithfulness to doctrinal elements, but rather the permanent reactivation of an attitude-- that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as the permanent critique of our historical era” (42). Besides, this work involves a scrupulous analysis of us as historically determined beings, and we should be ever on the lookout for the contingencies presenting themselves as apparent necessities. The work also entails our attempts directed to test and cross boundaries, to explore and extend possibilities of being free and being human.

Rather than seeking to establish the universal basis and conditions of knowledge and ethics, Foucault proposes to analyse the historical constitution of discourses in which we articulate what we think and do. The point of departure for Foucault from the Kantian essay is that while the Kantian approach tried to identify the limits which knowledge could not cross, Foucault argues that we should constantly devise ways of transgressing the frontiers imposed on us. Besides, one feels that there is a possibility, even a confident hope of ‘transcendence’ in the Kantian system, which is absent in Foucault. Significantly, Foucault describes his critique as genealogical in its aims and archaeological in its method. This, understood even in its minimal level, is a reminder of one’s inevitable historical rootedness as well as the huge implications emanating from it. Foucault’s deviation from Kant is implied in his slight misquotation of Kant’s motto of Enlightenment *sapere aude*. Foucault reverses the order of

this, quoting it as *aude sapere*, perhaps, thereby stressing the daring and transgressing involved in ‘Dare to be wise’, rather than the wisdom achieved through such daring.

Yet another point of departure in Foucault’s essay is to point out that Kant’s essay commits the error of mistaking culture-specific elements for *a priori* valid truth claims or “contemporary limits of the necessary” (43), for limits intrinsic to our very constitution and thinking and willing subjects. Therefore, obviously for Foucault, our inquiry into the history of thought is “will not be oriented retrospectively toward the ‘essential kernel of rationality’ that can be found in Enlightenment and that would have to be preserved in any event” (43). On the other hand, such an approach “will be oriented toward ‘the contemporary limits of the necessary’ that is toward what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects”(43). Obviously, the Enlightenment project, instead of liberating humanity from shackles, has constructed, in the name of reason and knowledge, a stifling apparatus which we are struggling to shake off. Hence the issue is how far the knowledge programme which is an elaborate discursive and textual schema has been conducive to the promotion of human happiness. When one realizes that the world, rather than always already, is “historically determined” (43), it calls for greater circumspection.

Foucault’s view sounds remarkably similar to Kant’s own as expressed in his famous three-fold question: “What can I know?”, “What should I will?”, and “What may I reasonably hope for?”. The crucial point of departure, as has been pointed out above, is that Foucault treats them in genealogical fashion—as belonging to a certain historically delimited configuration of knowledge, discourse or will-to-truth. That is to say, he rejects any version of the all too familiar universalist premise that would hold such views to be more than contingent and cultural artifice.

Hence, the Enlightenment project is viewed not so much as a “theory, a doctrine or even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating” but rather “as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (50)

In his essay, Foucault proposes to continue the project of Enlightenment. Describing it as an ethos and not a doctrine, helps him locate his work as figuring in the space opened by Kant’s essay, albeit with different solutions. Finally, just like Kant, Foucault holds that Enlightenment has not been completed and he doubts whether it would ever be complete. “I do not know if we will ever reach mature adulthood . . . the historical event of the Enlightenment did not make us mature adults, and we have not reached that stage yet”(49).

The essay discussed above hardly takes kindly to the present western skill development or knowledge programme. It detects some fundamental malaise inherent in the centuries-long

Enlightenment programme and by extension, all skill development initiatives. However, even as one despairs of any educational initiatives that can escape the critique Foucault is making, it becomes an emphatic, and a representative, confession of its failure. An alternative historical paradigm is what one may explore. And the bottom line is that any meaningful deliberation on skill development would become more self-conscious, with the acute awareness of its purpose, the cost involved as well as the possible outcome. Certain directions are unequivocally clear, that is, one needs to rethink about excessive and exclusive humanist and rationalist bias. Probably thinking in the lines of an Eastern model pioneered by India is in order.

The main stream Western academies talk of the failure of the Enlightenment Project. This sense of failure was by and large a matter of deflating the hopes based exclusively on human reason. Thus the widely shared sense of disillusionment had to do with the dawning of an awareness of the limitation of human reason. The nonhuman realm gradually came to be looked upon as fit for consumption and exploitation alone. Naturally, the realization, rather belatedly yet surely, regarding the need for reining in the human arrogance began to be felt. That one cannot deny intrinsic worth of everything nonhuman, that one cannot afford to have so much investment on human caprice, and that being tyrannical towards the nonhuman is at one's own peril, have been lessons that humanity has learned the hard way. Accordingly, the Western academies now talk of inclusive growth, cultural pluralism, ecological awareness, sustainable growth and so on.

True, India, by and large, remained insulated from the horrors that the West was exposed to in the first half of the 20th century. Evidently, modernity, if by and large imported from the West, struck roots in India at a slower pace. If one is honest and sensible enough to regard the mythical narratives of Indian mythology as imaginative, one has to grant that scientific exploration was in its incipient stage and was limited to isolated pockets then during the early modern period in the country. Consequently, India did not see the huge momentum in scientific advancement that characterised the West.

One wonders whether the stakeholders would take kindly to the description of the present Indian education scenario as a blind or even poor imitation of the West which is destined to end up by inheriting its perils, shorn of its merits even. One is in need of an educational system that emerges from the soil catering to the local contingencies, redolent of the autochthonous conditions as opposed to an imported one. Hence, broadly, the need of the hour is to develop an India specific model that is so inclusive that it would make the scientific rationality gel with our own cultural specificity. Needless to say, culture, instead of being located in the past as a thing in cold storage, is to be seen as the response, felt in the blood, of a people, vibrant and exposed to the universe.

One should, instead of being blind imitators, chart a composite and sustainable methodology attuned to India specific needs. And inclusivity is part of Indian inheritance. For instance, the Indian mainstream thought has been one that put unqualified stress on inclusivity with a human –nonhuman identification. The great *Mahavakayas* like *Aham Brahma Asmi*, (I am Brahman), *Tat Tvam Asi* (You are that [Brahman]), regardless of their numerous interpretations, are oriented towards such inclusion, ecological harmony and sustainability. We cannot go back to the past. Indeed, we should not. Instead, in the absence of a panacea for all the ills plaguing the world, we should together explore ways to make education relevant to everyone. Needless to say, that this India specific Higher Education should bear the stamp of global relevance. For, insularity, in the global village that the world is now, is neither desirable nor possible. The twin axes of India specificity and global applicability, therefore, should form the fulcrum for higher education in futuristic India.

While this may be the broad policy orientation for higher education in India, one has to seriously engage with the issues related to the actual execution of the policy.

Evidently, the issue assumes utmost significance in the context of the rather abysmally low ranking that has been slapped on Indian educational institutions vis-a-vis their global peers. That even our premier institutes figure nowhere near the frontrunners in the world academic realm is food for our serious thought. The fact that Indian universities are hardly in the reckoning for the ultimate Nobel laureateship unnerves us. The matter, obviously, demands urgent attention and calls for solution to be initiated on a war footing.

All our efforts, consequently, need to be streamlined with a singleness of purpose towards excellence within the broad framework suggested above.

The immediate target of our Higher Education, then, would be the following:

- i. the production of human resource par excellence,
- ii. continuous innovation in technological efficiency, and
- iii. achievement of optimum organizational economy.

Above all, the focal point of our efforts would be to benchmark research whose quality and rigour would, at the end of the day, distinguish men from boys. A discipline specific apex body to oversee and assess the quality of research output at the universities would go a long way in raising the quality to the desired level. The Indian Higher Education sector seems to be oblivious of the world of difference that separates an amateur from a virtuoso.

Above all, a world class curriculum underpinned by the state of the art infrastructure too is of fundamental importance to achieve the virtuosity towards which everyone aspires. In this context, the laudable efforts initiated at the national level for multiple accreditations, apart from NAAC may be noteworthy. Indeed, multiple rating agencies with varied domain specific parameters would be of considerable value in identifying the lacunae in the system

and to initiate remedial measures. Probably we will do well with more of such agencies. Needless to say, the external agency rating should be adequately supplemented by self evaluation through the use of rigorous performance indicators and benchmarking. Besides, statistical information gathered through surveys of students, employers, and professional bodies would form indices of quality. No one believes quality to be an accident. It can only emerge out of the conjoint effort of all the stakeholders and the resultant synergy in higher education everywhere. For, at the end of the day, as the adage goes, “From the fruits, you shall know them”.

Finally, all these initiatives should be simultaneously culture specific and must be oriented to meet the future needs of humanity at large. The historical rootedness of such efforts here, as always, has an element of inevitability about them, and in the final analysis this would define us as individuals. If such a definition of oneself is informed by a sense of transgressing the limits imposed by one’s present history, one can, given the unenviable human predicament, hardly ask for more.

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