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Booker T. Washington's Thoughts on Education and Their Relevance in Contemporary Educational System in India

*Dnyandev Namdev More**

"I would be helping in a more substantial way by assisting in the laying of the foundation of the race through a generous education of the hand, head and heart".

- Booker T. Washington

Abstract

The present paper unveils Booker T. Washington's thoughts on education and their relevance in the contemporary educational system in India. Education is the most powerful tool which changes our life, society and ultimately country. A proper education moulds an individual's character and makes his/her life better by inculcating moral values, intelligence, creativity and skills. It shows the way how to live and behave in society with dignity. It strengthens an individual's head, hand and heart. Booker T. Washington, a renowned African-American educationist, dedicated his entire life for the empowerment of the coloured people of America through the means of education. His educational model proposes industrial and technical education, agricultural education and training, vocational education, skill based knowledge, moral values, etc.

Keywords: Vocational education, Industrial training, Agricultural education, Skills, Empowerment, Employment, Moral values, Upliftment, Practical knowledge

* *Associate Professor, P. G. Department of English and Research Centre, People's College, Nanded – 431602, Maharashtra, India. Email: dnmore2015@gmail.com*

Education is the most effective tool for transforming the lives of men from darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge and irrational to rational. Evidently, it is the most powerful weapon with which we can change our life, society and ultimately country. Dr. Yogesh Singh, a well-known scholar, in his famous book, *History of Indian Education System* (2007*)*, aptly remarks: "Society is dynamic: it grows and decays, springs up again with renewed and stronger élan and vitality, permeating into the entire social edifice of which education is an important part" (Singh 2). As, we know, education certainly gives an eyesight-view to man to inquire into the world applying rational thinking. A proper education moulds all round development of personality and makes life better by inculcating moral values, intelligence, creativity and skills among them. It shows the way how to live and behave in society with dignity. It strengthens an individual's head, hand and heart. It is the only panacea to curb all evils in society and bring political, social, spiritual, cultural and economic changes in it. Professor Kimberly A. Goyette, in her masterpiece, *Education in America* (2017), summarizes the alpha and omega of the essence of modern education system as: The main purpose of the institution of education is to prepare young members of a society for their adult roles in that society. Two ways that youths are prepared for these adult roles are through socialization and through sorting or stratification (Goyette 6).

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), a renowned African-American educationist, dedicated his whole life for the betterment and empowerment of the coloured people of America through the means of education. He established the Tuskegee Institute (which is recognized a world famous educational institute in America today) to educate the coloured people in the southern part of America which resembles the great work of what Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, a well-known social reformist, did in India for the education of masses. His fundamental work in education is quite exemplary and applicable in the contemporary educational system in India. It is a milestone in World history in general and African-American history in particular. Hence, in this paper an honest attempt has been made to explore Booker T. Washington's thoughts on education and their relevance in the contemporary educational system in India.

Ranked among the best autobiographies in World Literature, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) documents his personal achievements especially in the noble field of education. It records his struggle for education, his generous efforts for providing education to the coloured, his work as a teacher, educator and founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. An in depth study of Washington's theory of education makes us realise that it can serve as a guide to Indian educationalists and policy makers in order to reform the Indian educational system. Washington consciously negates the age-old system of education which has no potential to meet the present needs of employability and suggests a suitable and effective model of education. He insists the need of practical knowledge rather than theoretical. He points out that teaching theory, without practical experience

and exposure, makes the student handicapped. He strongly opposes the idea of "mere book learning" which is not efficacious to inculcate skills and values. His idea of practical education was an imperative input in the field of education which is the need of the hour.

As we know, education has potential to bring about changes in an individual's behaviour and livelihood and here one can witness tremendous changes in the livelihood of the African-American community. Washington advocates the educational policy of Samuel Armstrong, his teacher and mentor and founder of the Hampton Institute (a reputed educational institute in America), who stresses the need of teaching practical knowledge related to day-to-day life activities (Simkin, *Spartacus Educational*). He endorses that there is a dire need to teach pupils common manners in life like how to comb hair properly, keep their hands, faces and cloths clean, proper use of the tooth-brush, importance of bath and eating in a proper way. To quote him: "We wanted to teach the students how to bathe, how to care for their teeth and clothing.… What to eat, and how to eat it properly and how to care for their rooms" (Washington 97). To teach these things are of utmost importance for the coloured people and not for the upper class strata of society. To them education is not a top priority. Alan Schroeder, in his book, entitled, *Booker T. Washington: Educator and Racial Spokesman* rightly observes: "In the South America, even for the upper-class strata, education was not a priority" (Schroeder 11).

Washington underlines the importance of moral values in human life. Hence, he insists the need of inclusion of the life and path breaking works of great personalities in the curricula of schools and colleges. He frankly admits that what he is today is due to Samuel Armstrong who motivated him and many others for moulding their personalities. He expounds that such liberal education is the need of the hour rather reading books and having costly apparatus only. To quote him: "There is no education which one can get from books and costly apparatus that is equal to that which can be gotten from contact with great men and women. Instead of studying books so constantly, how I wish that our schools and colleges might learn to study men and things!" (Washington 51)

What is special about Washington's theory of education is his down-to-earth practical and humanistic approach. For him, education is not a matter of 'mere book learning' and having costly apparatus like laptops and smart phones but it is a matter of knowing higher and noble things in life by studying men and things around us. Hence, he appeals to read men rather than books which inculcate moral values.

Washington insists teaching the 'Art of living' which one cannot learn from text-books. He wanted to provide for education which teaches how to live and how to work. Hence, he designs some field based activities in the curriculum. For instance, he asks his pupils to visit coloured families and prepare a detailed report on their problems and measures to be undertaken so that they might live a better life. It exhorts students to learn from the real life of ex-slaves. He asserts that education

is not "a thing apart from life- not a 'system', nor a philosophy; it is direct teaching how to live and how to work" (16). Actually, students are proud of book learning with the false assumption that they will become knowledgeable by reading huge books only. But such bookish knowledge in the form of mugging, as Washington points out, fails to solve problems in day-to-day life. He expounds that learning should motivate learners to think and acquire skills and practical knowledge through real life experience.

Washington emphasizes the need of industrial and technical education in addition to academic, religious and spiritual education. He propounds that students, with whatever financial ability, must acquire knowledge and training in some industry. To quote him: "We wanted to give them such a practical knowledge of someone industry, together with the spirit of industry, thrift, and economy, that they would be sure of knowing how to make a living after they had left us. We wanted to teach them to study actual things instead of mere books alone" (Washington 97).

The Tuskegee Institute resolves to mete out industrial training in terms of required skills and knowledge for industry. He believes that skill-oriented education is an essential part of higher learning in the country. Hence, the training in terms of bricks making, preparing furniture and vehicles like wagons, carts and buggies as well as farming, sewing, dairying, gardening, fruit-growing, bee-culture and poultry-raising have to be provided to students. For him, it is compulsory on the part of students to work at least half of each day at some industry which helps them start business immediately after completion of their education. Resultantly, scores of trainees mastered various trades and starts industry in many parts of the South. Some of them start small business like laundry, dairy farm, truck garden, garages, etc. Subsequently, these coloured students were found useful by larger society and their work was recognised and honoured accordingly. This is what the real value of education is.

Washington endorses the need of agricultural education and training considering the fact that eighty five per cent of the coloured people in America depend upon agriculture as their main business for livelihood. So, he resolves to give top priority to agricultural education and accordingly, reserves one section of the land of the Tuskegee Institute for agricultural cultivation. Resultantly, students cultivate the land with hard labour and get yields at one level, and knowledge and skills to train farmers, at another. They utilise their knowledge to show people how to put new energy and ideas into farming in order to increase produce. They also boost their confidence by giving moral support and technical assistance. This is real application of education in actual life.

Washington gives top priority to vocational education and endorses that it should be introduced as a compulsory subject for slow and steady development of students. It teaches skills in addition to character building, personal hygiene, mannerisms and dignity of labour. He advocates incorporating various course modules of different disciplines of knowledge like agriculture, mechanics, commerce and management,

domestic service, mathematics, laundering, trades, languages, etc. in curricula. It incentivizes them to do work and be independent. It provides students with job opportunities in various industries at one level and helps them start business at another. For instance, Mr. Campbell and Mr. Adams, alumni of the Tuskegee Institute start their own business and become well-known entrepreneurs. It is needless to say that such learning outcome based education is imperative in the contemporary Indian educational system to make it more sustainable.

Washington's concept of ideal education consists of equal parts of vocational training and book learning, a kind of blended learning, which is required for a specific trade or craft like carpentry, agriculture, engineering, medicine, printing, shoemaking, architecture, etc. To him, vocational education is the perfect and suitable means for the upliftment of students, fellow citizens and ultimately country. However, W. E. B. Du Bois, a noted critic, comments that Washington's educational model is harmful as it will keep coloured Americans a "laboring class" and promote social segregation and political suppression. To me, it is very difficult to agree with his comment as his ideas are really beneficial to get required skills and knowledge for employment. His idea of inclusion of vocational and industrial skills helped the coloured carve a niche in a racial-biased society.

Washington strongly feels that the Central Government should make a special provision of financial assistance for the general education of his people in the annual budget. However, neither the Central Government nor the states have made any financial provision for their education. Hence, he regrets their in different and callous attitude towards the education of the coloured people. He attacks: "Even as a youth, and later in manhood, I had the feeling that it was cruelly wrong of the central government…to fail to make some provision for the general education of our people in addition to what the states might do, so that the people would be the better prepared for the duties of citizenship" (Washington 69).

It is the prime responsibility of the government to provide free and compulsory education to all and sundry irrespective of colour, region, caste, etc. However, the Central as well as State governments in America have not taken it seriously. The condition of India in terms of education is not different as successive governments in the journey of more than seven decades of independence have failed to provide special attention towards the education of masses. Washington urges that the government should seriously think about it and here lies the relevance of his thoughts on education in the contemporary educational system in India.

Washington accords top priority to physical labour which helps make students self-independent and self-reliant. He prescribes physical labour as compulsory for every student without which degree will not be awarded. He framed a strict rule that no student, no matter how much money he may be able to command, is permitted to go through school without doing manual labour. Its prime objective is to teach not only the utility of labour but its 'beauty and dignity'. It inspires students to love work

for its own sake. He teaches students the latest and best methods of labour. In the curriculum, field-based activity is mandatory in which every graduate is sent to field to know the importance of labour. He wants to relate the subject matter to the real experiences of students. Resultantly, many students learn to love work and construct many excellent buildings. One of the graduates cultivates an acre of land and produces two hundred and sixty-six bushels of sweet potatoes with hard work.

Washington's model of industrial education and training, agricultural education and training, vocational education, to teach moral values and the art of living is quite relevant in the contemporary education system in India at large. Washington incorporated this type of courses in curricula before one and half centuries ago, whereas, the Indian education system has from primary to higher education ignored to teach these life skills and importance of physical labour. There is an urgent need to focus on vocational education in addition to moral values which contribute enormously to the upliftment of the individual as well as society at large.

Indian youth is not galvanized and groomed to undertake business, start ups like American graduates because sufficient industrial education and training is not provided to them. As a result, the problem of employment is increasing day-by-day in India. Every student in India is eager to get government job but such opportunities are not available in proportion to the number of aspirants. Hence, highly educated students with highest degrees like PhDs, MBAs, etc. stand in the line of job seekers even for the post of clerks and peons. This is a grim picture of the Indian education system which leads us to feel the urgent need to revisit our ideas of education and Washington's educational model is the solution for this.

True, education means inculcating moral values, positive thinking, dignity of labour, helping others, the idea of giving back to society and so on. However, the Indian education system demands securing good marks and grades in examinations rather promoting learners to learn skill based knowledge. It is an open secret that the rat-race of securing good marks in examinations rarely reveals students' talent. To make the situation worse, even contemporary textbooks do not mention how curricula are applicable in practical life. Hence, Washington's practical and vocational courses to be executed in the Indian education system are useful to bring about positive changes in our academic and day-to-day lives.

In a nutshell, Washington, in his educational model, proposes industrial and technical education, agricultural education and training, vocational education, art of living, physical labour, skill-based knowledge, moral values, etc. (Reeser). This is the reason why American students earn money while seeking education and get employment after completion of degrees, whereas, their Indian counterparts fight for job opportunities even after securing highest degrees. Hence, Washington's educational model is quite relevant and applicable and needs to be adopted and executed in the contemporary educational system in India to bring about radical reforms in it.

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