

EDUCATION TO DIALOGUE

A different approach feasible and necessary in India today promoted by the Pillars of Don Bosco System of Education (DBSE)

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- ABSTRACT-

Drawing attention to the socio-political milieu of India today, the paper takes for granted the urgent need for an education that promotes humanisation and harmony in and through academic and extra academic processes and insists on the need for initiating healthy *intra-cultural, intercultural* and *interreligious dialogue* in young minds, leading to humanising and harmonising social practices. The pillars of the Don Bosco System of Education- Reason, Religion and Rapport (Loving Kindness) are considered and proposed as appropriate dimensions of personal and interpersonal formation of the young, to promote values like humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality, which are essential for a process of dialogue of life, as proposed by those who believe in Dialogue.

"Education in India stands at the crossroads today. Neither normal linear expansion nor the existing pace and nature of improvement can meet the needs of the situation" - These are not my words at the start of this paper, but a quote from the National Policy for Education in India formulated in 1986 (*NPE 1986*, 1.9). They sound so apt for the situation such as we have today and we are even more surprised when the NPE says, "India's political and social life is passing through a phase, which poses the danger of erosion of long-accepted values. The goals of secularism, socialism, democracy and professional ethics are coming under increasing strain" (*NPE 1986*, 1.11). Does that not sound so enigmatically accurate to describe the socio-political milieu that we are confronted with today?

1. The Socio-political milieu in India

India has always been rightly described as a subcontinent not merely on geographical grounds but in respect of many other dimensions such as, racial, linguistic, cultural and religious. Looking for homogeneity in India is like looking for a palm with all fingers identical. Weird, isn't it! But it does not seem so for some quarters which are forcing such a vision on India. The result, tensions rising nationwide, confusion in the minds of the ordinary people and opinions created that give rise to an unprecedented polarisation across the polity.

Let us begin with the global conflicts, just to place India within a context. Humankind at large is characterized by rising intolerance and unwarranted stand offs. The ongoing nuclear

bickering between the United States and the North Korean Republic, that has kept the whole world under pressure; the ISIS conflict which finds a place in every threat list made globally today; the ever-present Palestine-Israel conflict that has once again surged; the refugee issue which has taken mammoth proportions; the Indo-Pak mutual allegations of perpetrating terror and the India-China standoff at the Doklam border. Look at these conflicts. Can we miss noticing this global culture of intolerance and socio-political polarisation and the effect that it is bound to have on the Indian collective psyche?

Far from blaming the global scenario, India has its own polity that is changing gears. It would suffice to glance through the headlines of the papers for the half a decade that has passed and we would have our minds filled with concern. Lynching of persons, hate crimes, communal polarisation, cow vigilantism, love jihad, silence of the media over certain crucial issues, governmental apathy, pseudo patriotism, silencing of dissident voices, increasingly susceptible religious sensitivities, belligerent attempts to thrust fallacious opinions on people, too many undercurrents camouflaged by ludicrous dissensions on frivolous social issues, caste distinctions resulting in social unease, a pronounced commitment to a fascist agenda... these have rendered it impossible to look at the Indian social situation as we did a quarter of a century ago.

The situation sounds alarming, but it has certainly not been an overnight transformation. Thanks to a well-spaced out strategy by the factionist forces, society today has become permeated with an ideology that has already crept into the mainstream Indian mind. Thinkers all this while have been pointing to this disturbing situation at various meetings and forums. The least we can say is, we had taken it lightly in the past, but can that continue still? Now, the question is- where was Education amidst this transition? Blissfully striving after the lofty goals set for itself unaware of the foundations that were being gnawed upon.

2. An Education that promotes Humanisation

It would be an unjust exaggeration to say the Education institutions in India were completely unaware of the constant corrosion of the foundational values of India's social integrity. The Educational Policies of India from the beginning have underlined the importance of an Education that humanises, not merely that which promotes economic and material development. The first National Policy on Education was envisioned in the year 1968 (*NPE 1968*), after a National Education Commission discussed its role from 1964 onwards. The *NPE 1968* states it in unambiguous terms:

radical reconstruction of education on the broad lines recommended by the education commission is essential for economic and cultural development of the country, for ***national integration*** and for realising the ideal of a socialistic pattern of society. This will involve a transformation of the system to relate it more closely to the life of the people; a continuous effort to expand educational opportunity; a sustained and intensive effort to raise the quality of education at all stages; an emphasis on the development of science and technology; and the ***cultivation of moral and social values***. The educational system must produce ***young men and women of character and ability*** committed to national service and development. Only then will education be able to play its vital role in promoting national progress, creating ***a sense of common citizenship and culture, and strengthening national integration***[emphasis within the policy statements, here and henceforth, has been added] (NPE, 1968. para. 3).

The National Policy on Education was revised in the year 1986 (NPE 1986), after less than a couple of decades but already then, the emphasis had changed and it can be noted with lucidity.

Life in the coming decades is likely to bring ***new tensions together with unprecedented opportunities***. To enable people to benefit from the new environment will require new designs of human resource development. The coming generations should have the ability to internalise new ideas constantly and creatively. They have to be imbued with ***a strong commitment to humane values and social justice***. All this implies ***better education***. (NPE 1986, 1.14)

The Policy in no unclear terms pitches for a 'better education' defining it in terms of ***humane values and social justice*** because the times are changing. It observes that, "education has an acculturating role. It refines sensitivities and perceptions that contribute to national cohesion, a scientific temper and independence of mind and spirit - thus furthering the goals of socialism, secularism and democracy enshrined in our Constitution." (NPE 1986, 2.2) In addition to this the Policy reminds us that, "India has always worked for peace and understanding between nations, treating the whole world as one family. True to this hoary tradition, Education has to strengthen this world view and motivate the younger generations for international co-operation and peaceful co-existence. This aspect cannot be neglected." (NPE 1986, 3.5). It took it upon itself to enrich the curricula and the processes of education by emphasising to the utmost the cultural content, enabling children to develop sensitivity to beauty, harmony and refinement. (Cf. NPE 1986, 8.2) Insisting on the role of Value Education, the Policy stated that "the growing concern over the erosion of essential values and an increasing cynicism in society has brought to focus the need for readjustments in the curriculum in order to make education a forceful tool for the cultivation of social and moral values." (NPE 1986, 8.4) It maintained that "in our ***culturally plural society***, education should foster universal and eternal values, oriented towards ***the unity and integration of our people***. Such value education should help eliminate obscurantism, religious fanaticism, violence, superstition and fatalism." (NPE 1986, 8.5)

One can notice a radical change in the voice of the Policy, shifting from calling for a mere common citizenship and national integration to an increased sensitivity to plurality, unity and integration of people fighting against fanaticism and violence. This Policy of 1986 was intended to be retouched in 1992 but nothing other than a few additions were made to the existing clauses. In 2005, the erstwhile proposal of a core national curriculum was attempted to be formulated. In the process of formulation, the commission declared:

The basic concerns of education—to enable children to make sense of life and develop their potential, to define and pursue a purpose and recognise the right of others to do the same—stand uncontested and valid even today. If anything, we need to reiterate the mutual interdependence of humans, and, as Tagore says, we achieve our greatest happiness when we realise ourselves through others. Equally, we need to reaffirm our commitment to the concept of equality, within the landscape of cultural and socio-economic diversity from which children enter into the portals of the school. Individual aspirations in a competitive economy tend to reduce education to being an instrument of material success. The perception, which places the individual in exclusively competitive relationships, puts unreasonable stress on children, and thus distorts values. It also makes learning from each other a matter of little consequence. Education must be able to promote values that foster peace, humaneness and tolerance in a multicultural society. (*National Curriculum Framework 2005*, p.2. Henceforth referred to with the acronym *NCF 2005*)

By now, the issues related to the multiculturalism of the Indian polity and the insistence on an increased sensitivity had begun to occupy the centre stage. Over a decade ago, the Framework had further underscored that,

living in harmony within oneself and with one's natural and social environment is a basic human need. Sound development of an individual's personality can take place only in an ethos marked by peace. A disturbed natural and psycho-social environment often leads to stress in human relations, triggering intolerance and conflict. ***We live in an age of unprecedented violence— local, national, regional and global.*** Education often plays a passive or even insidious role, allowing young minds to be indoctrinated into a culture of intolerance, which denies the fundamental importance of human sentiments and the noble truths discovered by different civilisations. Building a culture of peace is an incontestable goal of education. Education to be meaningful should empower individuals to choose peace as a way of life and enable them to become managers rather than passive spectators of conflict. Peace as an integrative perspective of the school curriculum has the potential of becoming an enterprise for healing and revitalising the nation. (*NCF 2005*, pp.6-7.)

The Church has been in the field of educating India right from the earliest times of the process. And as an institution, the Church has shared the convictions of the National Policies on Education. The Church as an important player in the up building of the nation has taken on itself the task of giving this nation an Education of quality and relevance to all, in particular, to the marginalized sections of society; an Education that frees persons from their social conditioning, such as caste, class, gender and other prejudices; an Education that makes the young aware of the inalienable human rights of every individual and group, helping them thus to foster pluralism, cultural and religious diversity, individual and collective freedoms and respect for and appreciation of differences; an Education that

humanises and contextualises, by inspiring the students to raise essential questions concerning the meaning of life and of their role in society; an Education that enables the youth to understand the implications of economic policies and structures, political decisions and the media; an Education that energizes the young to take up the task of contributing to nation-building; an Education that forms the young to evolve as men and women of character, competence, conscience, compassion and commitment, who will contribute to the evolution of a counter-culture to the present ruthlessly competitive model, by promoting collaboration and cooperation for the growth of all, in a climate of mutual trust and sharing; an Education which nurtures an encounter with God as a personal event and a free response to the call to faith and which nurtures a life of meaning, purpose and personalised values, including appreciation of other faiths (CBCI Education Policy. 2.3.1 - 2.3.8).

This is in summary the type of Education that India needs today, an Education that humanises. Rising beyond the concerns of producing employable candidates out of our youngsters, our process of education has to occupy itself with the forming, nurturing and grooming of a generation that can humanise India, revitalising values that are on the wane. It is here we propose the Education to Dialogue. It is not a specific curriculum but a perspective for handling everything, curricular or extracurricular within the process of education. Having come half way through, the remaining task of this paper is to explain what this Education to Dialogue is all about and underline the competence of Don Bosco's System of Education in promoting this perspective of Education.

3. Education to Dialogue - a Necessity in a Pluricultural Society.

With the distinction that *multiculturalism* is a sociological and political reality, while *pluriculturalism* is an approach to such a socio-political reality, being aware, sensitive, appreciative and positive about it, we cannot gainsay the fact that in India, we live in a pluricultural society. *Interculturalism* is one's positive and proactive living out of one's convictions, values, priorities and perspectives, which are together called one's culture, in direct and multilayered relation with the others' culture or cultures. And the process of education in a pluricultural society cannot be indifferent to the various specificities proper to such a culture, especially when the society becomes more and more delicately aware of the presence of such pluralities, it has definitely to take interculturalism seriously. A humanising

education as proposed earlier, in such a pluricultural society has to necessarily deal with an education to dialogue, which is essentially an intercultural education!

Having discussed so far what we mean by education within this context, we need to now understand what we mean by dialogue. By dialogue we do not mean here some academic exchange of thoughts, nor scholarly debate of issues. By dialogue here we refer to an attitude, a mindset, a mentality, a way of thinking that is imbibed by persons being formed - a perspective that essentially contains the following qualities: Openness, Communication, Understanding, Respect and Solidarity.

(i) The Dialogue mentality begins with **Openness**, an openness to observe 'difference' in the other without scandal or surprise. Openness notices differences not with the motive of comparison or judgment, but with a keenness to learn and a acumen to wonder.

(ii) The Dialogue mentality readily **Communicates** with the other, with frank and critical appreciation. Comparison does have a role to play in dialogue but not with a view to prove one's superiority or cower in inferiority, but to analyse the variety and appreciate its richness.

(iii) The Dialogue mentality seeks to **Understand** the sense and the experience that lies behind the difference that is noticed in the other's ways of thought and practice. At times this understanding can lead to an assimilation or to a critique of what is perceived.

(iv) The Dialogue mentality prepares one to **Respect** the other's opinion, practice, freedom and rights, as long as it does not affect the common good. It prepares the person to respect something even if he or she does not accept it.

(v) The Dialogue mentality moves one towards **Solidarity**, that is, the capacity to stand by the other despite differences, the joy of sharing experiences notwithstanding the disparities and the quality of taking responsibility for each other's well being.

3.1. The Three Crucial Dimensions of Dialogue for an Indian Ambient

The Dialogue mentality or the dialogical approach needs to take three important directions to have its effect of challenging the society from 'multiculturality to interculturality'(Moral, 2012. p.99). In a simplified manner we can enlist them as follows: Intra-cultural dialogue, Intercultural dialogue and Interreligious dialogue.

3.1.1. Intra-cultural dialogue is the necessary recognition of the sub-cultures within a culture. Within the reality of Indian society, a young person, for instance, begins to understand immediate cultural affiliations he /she has - for instance the language, the clan of the family, the caste and the community of origin. These play a vital role even today, especially today, with regard to the conception a person has on the society around notwithstanding the fact whether the person accepts it as presented or comes to reject it eventually. The person needs to be challenged by education to dialogue within his or her culture and find the right elements to be promoted and the wrong ones to be denounced.

3.1.2. Intercultural dialogue is in simple terms an interaction of a person within a community with persons of other communities, that of a community with other communities! Culture, if understood as a summary term for all customs, practices, ideologies and values that are bundled together as an experience shared by a community of persons, comes into direct conversation with such another, effecting four possible outcomes: Integration, Separation, Assimilation and Marginalisation. Francis Vincent presents these four models within the framework of two variables, one, safeguarding one's own identity and tradition and the other, the desired dialogue with the other community. When both tendencies- to safeguard and the aptitude to dialogue are high, it results in Integration, the most desirable and utopian outcome. When the tendency to safeguard is high and the aptitude to dialogue is very low, it leads to Separation, the most undesired outcome or a threat. When the tendency to safeguard is quite low and the aptitude to dialogue is high, it results in Assimilation which has to be analysed with care as to whether it is healthy or not. When both tendencies to safeguard and the aptitude to dialogue are low, the result is marginalisation or a situation where one ceases to exist for the other. (Anthony, 2012. p.170.)

3.1.3. Interreligious dialogue is a crucial form of dialogue, in a multi-religious society like India. Though religion can well be considered a constituent part of the *whole* called, 'culture', however, a context such as India requires a special treatment of its religious dimension. Taking the concrete situation of the ambient of education, with which we are concerned here, we see that the religious differences are the most apparently experienced, apart from linguistic and economic factors. Considering the communal overtones of the social happenings in India, Interreligious dialogue ought to occupy a privileged status of priority. Again drawing from our discussion earlier on the dialogue mentality, it is an attitude of respect, openness and peaceful coexistence that needs to be ensured here.

3.2. The Personal and Interpersonal Formation

Education to dialogue, therefore, means a formation of the individual person and the group of persons involved, with a strong dialogue mentality towards a healthy intra-cultural, intercultural and interreligious interaction, that lead to Nation building. The formation has to be very strongly personal, because a dialogue mentality is all about convictions and a way of life. It has to mould the person into one with a dialogue mentality that we spoke of, as a requirement for the process of dialogue. Dialogue, by its very essence, is interpersonal and that is what makes it highly precarious. The formation has to be interpersonal too, if the process has to be coherent and the effect, relevant. Though there are scores of thinkers who inspire us towards this vision of formation in dialogue, we shall here restrict ourselves with just one contribution.

Dealing with these two levels of formation, personal and interpersonal, in a single stroke, Catherine Cornille (2004) in her work provides us with a checklist of dispositions to be developed in a person or in a community of persons, if we really want to build the society up.

(i) Humility: the radical sense of acknowledgement of the limitation and imperfection of one's insights and accomplishments, which drives one from complacency to an active search for growth in truth. There can be *humility towards* the other traditions and *humility about* one's own tradition and its comprehension.

(ii) Commitment: when approached with a dual commitment, one to the tradition one belongs to and the other to a constant and genuine search for truth, dialogue proves an occasion to deepen and broaden one's overall cognizance.

(iii) Interconnection: is avoiding extreme opinions of radical singularity and fundamental incomparability. Dialogue is made possible by the fact that in spite of the differences that traditions have in their convictions and practices, a common ground is possible where they can meet each other. There can be three categories of these meeting grounds: *External Challenges, Common Experience and the Transcendent Ultimate Reality.*

(iv) Empathy: presupposes a willingness and ability to penetrate into the mind-set of the other and understand him or her from within. This 'from within' is the kernel of an authentic

dialogue, and it is called 'empathy'. As a condition of possibility, empathy requires *sympathy, experience, and imagination*.

(v) **Hospitality**: understood as a generous openness to perceive, understand, accept and welcome the presence of truth in the other's tradition. With such an attitude of hospitality one senses a possibility of discovering the truth in the other, which entuses the person to enter into dialogue with the other. On the contrary, the denial to accept any truth beyond one's own boundaries can block all possibilities of authentic dialogue.

4. The Pillars of Don Bosco's System of Education as Promoters of Education to Dialogue

Reason, Religion and Rapport, the three pillars of DBSE, lend themselves perfectly to the type of education that we have been projecting as the felt need for India today. The dialogue mentality that we spoke of and the dispositions to dialogue that we reflected on from Catherine Cornille, can be cultivated within the framework of these three pillars presented by DBSE. As the fact is, the System was not a mere a theoretical framework presented by a founder of chain of schools! It was a reflection by Don Bosco, a recognised educator of the 19th century, on his life-experience with the young boys who came from varied quarters of the society and who grew with Don Bosco into holistic persons and responsible citizens. There were three principles that guided Don Bosco in everything that he did with the young learners. Don Bosco would call these three principles: Reason, Religion and Loving Kindness - not merely for its alliteration but to sound more academic and less affective - we shall refer to them as *Reason, Religion* and *Rapport*, without losing the essential sense that Don Bosco attached to those terms.

Reason or reasonableness, as in DBSE, is the method of appealing to the reason, the fair judgment, the scientific temper and the critical sense within a learner. A dialogue mentality begins with this Openness, the openness of a mind to reason out, listen and perceive scientifically the truth that is present. The capacity to go into oneself, look out into the reality and compare experiences and communicate with the others who share the learning process are the traits that are developed here. As per the dispositions to dialogue that Cornille presents, this amounts to humility, with which a person truly knows himself/herself, comprehensively accepts himself/herself and feels confident enough to expose the same to

the other players within the process. In a *banking mode* of education where everything one needs to know is supplied and all that is expected of the person is to take it in and store it safe, it is extremely difficult to elicit a critical self understanding and open communication. The appeal to reason in every phase of the process, naturally draws the learner to a spontaneous reasonableness, which can easily result in the critical consciousness and communication, that we desire.

In an educational ambient where a person is made more and more to think and reflect about himself/herself, rather than merely gulping down prepared materials of academic and non academic nature, he or she strengthens their rational quotient to the extent that they cannot be swayed by mere public opinion and mob mentalities. Creating occasions and experiences with such an objective is crucial to the educative process in a sentiment-swayed India. A person who goes through such an experience of exercising one's reason, is led to an Intra-personal and Intra-cultural dialogue and would definitely question irrational schemes that affect our socio-political atmosphere - like communalism, casteism and fanaticism.

Religion in DBSE is an appeal to the spiritual self of the persons involved - the educator whose spiritual commitment leads to taking up the task of education and the learner whose spiritual core longs for realisation and self-manifestation. The dialogue mentality of understanding oneself at one's deepest level and understanding the other from a deeper point of view is made possible only by recourse to the spiritual self of the learner. Losing oneself within the activities that occupy themselves with the shallow and apparent would cost the process much and would result in nothing more than an insensitive competition. An appeal to the deeper self of a person invites the person not to look at himself/herself as the be-all and end-all of all that is. It relativises the self with the others who are present and with the 'Other' who is ever present. This helps the learner to understand that he or she lives in interaction and that interaction needs to be respectful. Such a process challenges the person to acknowledge his/her own commitment to society and humanity at large, because he or she is always bound to the entire reality.

In an educational ambient, a person has to be tempered with relativisations that are necessary for the person to understand that he or she is not the absolute, he or she cannot be the centre of the universe and every other thing or person is not at his or her service. This kind of exaggerated humanism leads persons to a disproportionate self-centeredness that runs

unbridled and is pernicious. Inter religious dialogue for example in a multi-religious context like India is a reminder not to absolutise claims but to have a commitment to respect and understand the other, appreciate their difference and learn from each other. Only an insistence on the true and authentic spiritual quotient of the person can prepare him or her to respect and understand the spiritual core of the others. Exercises of mutual understanding and appreciation that are undertaken within the educational ambient with the conscious objectives of improving the spiritual depth of individual persons, can result in a devaluing and denunciation of superstitions, fundamentalism and hate politics.

Rapport is slightly a variant from the previous two principles in DBSE, as the former two speak primarily of a faculty within the learner to be appealed to; the third accentuates the faculty within the educator, to relate and to inspire the same eagerness to relate in the learner. The stress is on the preparation of the right persons to play the role of educators within this all-important process of education. Though learning and growing is ultimately an internal process, the catalytic and enhancing dimension of the educator cannot be overemphasised. The primary task of the educator is not in 'doing' what is expected of him or her but in 'being' a person in solidarity with the learners, in solidarity with the society that yearns for a better tomorrow and in solidarity with the humanity that dreams of its fullest flowering. The capacity of the educator to interconnect with the learner, teaches the learners to interconnect with each other! The respectful, empathetic and hospitable rapport that the educator cultivates and nurtures with the learners, prepares them to imitate the same in their turn. An educative process that lacks interconnection between those who are involved in the process can become robotic and inhuman. Achieving goals and reaching targets cannot be the primary concern within this process, rather connecting with persons, growing sensitive to the others and becoming increasingly human are qualities which really matter.

In an educational ambient where relationships are valued, treasured and prioritised, others' opinions, experiences and convictions are met with empathy and solidarity. It is here that the relational quotient of the person is developed and every bit of human life becomes shared, supported and sensitised. This dimension of the process makes one uneasy about the kind of development that is promoted by heartless globalisation, dehumanising monopolisation and atrocious power games. In their own relationships the learners begin to understand the rudiments of liberating relatedness and contrast it with the ruins of an *unrelated progress mentality*. The ambient of working together, sharing experiences, celebrating life in unison,

recognising the goodness in the other and offering oneself in service of the other, directs the young learners to think in terms of National Integration, Sustainable Development and Social Solidarity.

Conclusion

Quality Education,

"is not a system glued to individualism, ambition, competition, mere academic results, grading and standardizing. Quality education in the true sense produces persons with thought and feeling, with eagerness to share; persons who are capable of looking to nobler things in life. It has reference to things like the all-round development of persons, humanism, authentic values, intellectual curiosity and acuteness, aesthetic sensitivity, reading habits, character formation, social awareness, healthy relationships, refined manners, dignified self-presentation, intelligent and clear self-expression..." (*CBCI Education Policy, 2.3.1 (1)*).

It is an education that prepares the young learner to live his or her life to the full in the wider society, finding meaning in oneself and making a difference to the others. This preparation is an education to dialogue, to dialogue with oneself, to dialogue with the significant others and to dialogue with the ultimate meaning giving Other. Many dehumanising experiences we come across in the Indian social arena today, are caused by either insensitivity or irrationality. It is a sad sign that our process of education (though it has not reached to 100% of the Indian polity yet) has somewhere missed its true direction. Reason, Religion and Rapport as three pillars of the DBSE, that can strike the right chord in a young learner to grow up into a person with a strong dialogical mentality and a deep human solidarity, which alone can make India more human, humane, holistic and harmonious.

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