

Education and Social Transformation

A Roundtable Meeting organized by the Baha'i Chair for Studies in Development, DAVV as part of the bi-monthly series 'Dialogues on Development'

Concept Note

The process of education has always been considered one of the primary means through which desired transformation in society can be achieved. Indian society is at present going through unprecedented changes. Many of these changes are positive. On every side signs of the country's growing economic, technological and scientific strength are evident. In the seven decades since independence the country has undoubtedly advanced on many development indicators. For many Indians, especially those living in cities, their quality of life has improved and they and their children see greater opportunities for progress.

Yet this is only one part of the story. The progress achieved has largely benefited a few and widened the gap between them and the majority who live in desperate poverty. This shocking disparity led economists Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze to wonder whether development is "making the country look more and more like islands of California in a sea of sub-Saharan Africa". Another worrying byproduct of economic growth has been the pollution of the environment and of food sources, and the plundering of the country's natural resources. Similarly, the aggressive promotion of individualism and consumerism in the name of development and globalization has diluted values such as solidarity, decency, compassion and commitment to the common good. There has scarcely been a more crucial time for those in the field of education to raise in young generations the capacity to direct development along just and sustainable lines.

Although the field of education in India has made great advances in the past few decades, no one who is familiar with its current state would claim that it is in a state of readiness to respond to the needs of the hour. The crises afflicting the system are complex and many-sided. On the one hand with the marketization of education, schools, colleges and universities have turned into brands. When educational institutions begin to function as businesses in a marketplace, the imperative of being profitable and maintaining a competitive advantage takes precedence over its obligations to society in terms of raising responsible, morally sensitive and conscientious citizens. This change in orientation reflects in a shift in the educational agenda – from raising the student's ability to engage in abstract and critical thinking to focusing on narrowly-defined degree programs that cater to specific job requirements. Further, the content of what is studied in classrooms often has little direct relevance to the needs and conditions of the society in which the student lives. A false dichotomy between theory and practice, between what is studied in the classroom and the reality that is encountered in life is perpetuated which tends to alienate the student from his or her environment.

The lack of ability in most students to be reflective, to be seriously concerned about issues facing society and to be meaningfully engaged in efforts to bring about change is perhaps one of the most serious consequences of the superficiality and parochialism that afflicts the system.

If education is to achieve its true aim at this period in history, it must assist rising generations to fulfill a twofold purpose – to develop their intellectual and spiritual capacities and to draw upon these capacities in striving for the transformation of society. These two purposes are mutually reinforcing. It is in working for the positive transformation of society that the individual tests his or her knowledge and understanding and learns the skills and insights necessary for bringing knowledge to the benefit of society. Similarly, efforts to transform society will be shallow, fragile and unsustainable unless they are accompanied by capacity building in individuals.

Given below are a few questions to stimulate discussion on the theme of the roundtable:

- If we agree that the greatest challenge facing our highly interconnected world today is to establish relationships based on the principles of oneness, justice and sustainability, what would be some of the values that educational programs would need to foster in citizens to make them effective agents promoting such a change?
- To become a determined protagonist of change requires the individual to overcome a sense of passivity towards the condition of society and the wellbeing of others. Unfortunately the culture that young people grow in today, which is shaped by the social media and consumerism, tends to cultivate a sense of self-absorption, apathy and a preoccupation with desires that can be instantly gratified. How can educational programs help students overcome the allurements of such a culture and become selfless and determined agents of change?
- What would be the standard of excellence for an educational system that does not believe in competition or in exalting one individual above the rest? How would students be motivated in such a system to strive for excellence? Where does the motivation come from?
- How can service to the community be incorporated into the educational experience in a way that is not extraneous to the curriculum? What role does service play as a pedagogical tool?