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# T. S. Eliot's views on Education

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We are in a period in which cultural breakdown has been manifested in every sphere of human activity in the wake of economic development and large-scale industrialization. Still fresh in our minds are the many cases of juvenile delinquency that Japanese society has produced because of its unusual educational system of placing undue emphasis on academic backgrounds.

What Eliot asserted in his essays on education still appeals to us, therefore, in the sense that his idea of cultural breakdown will not seem to us like some fire on a far shore, nor will it seem that way to non-western society at large. It makes sense for modern Asian people to re-examine Eliot's views on education if we hope to make our own societies healthy and sound. The following passage indicates that Eliot already predicted a crisis in education about half a century ago.

... it is easy to proceed to the conclusion — for we all agree about the “cultural breakdown”— that education for everybody is the means we must employ for putting civilization together again. Now so long as we mean by “education” everything that goes to form the good individual in a good society, we are in accord, though the conclusion does not appear to get us anywhere, but when we come to mean by “education” that

limited system of instruction which the Ministry of Education controls, or aims to control, the remedy is manifestly and ludicrously inadequate.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of education for everyone is desirable, because people in earlier ages had the education necessary only for the jobs they were expected to perform.<sup>2</sup> Eliot, on the other hand, seems to indicate that mass education has caused the decline of culture. Eliot cites D. R. Hardman's speech in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* :

The age of industrialism and democracy had brought to an end most of the great cultural traditions of Europe, and not least that of architecture. In the contemporary world, in which the majority were half-educated and many not even a quarter-educated, and in which large fortunes and enormous power could be obtained by exploiting ignorance and appetite, there was a vast cultural breakdown which stretched from America to Europe and from Europe to the East.<sup>3</sup>

Eliot might be suggesting that the phenomenon of "half-education" has been promoted by the idea of giving "equality of opportunity" to everyone ; healthy and sound education has to raise up first-rate ability and genius, not to live in obscurity. There needs to be a sense of proper balance between preserving first-rate ability and providing "equal opportunity" of education. The following passage would be true even in our age.

... education should help to preserve the class and to select the élite. It is right that the exceptional individual should have the opportunity to elevate himself in the social scale and attain a position in which he can exercise his talents to the greatest benefit of himself and of society. But the ideal of an educational system which would automatically sort out

everyone according to his native capacities is unattainable in practice ; and if we made it our chief aim, would disorganise society and debase education. It would disorganise society, by substituting for classes, élites of brains, or perhaps only of sharp wits. Any educational system aiming at a complete adjustment between education and society will tend both to restrict education to what will lead to success in the world, and to restrict success in the world to those persons who have been good pupils of the system.<sup>4</sup>

It can be said that man has to study for the sake of studying searching for truth without thinking of any practical advantage which would be brought to him after the study. One might argue that education to Eliot represents a cultural manifestation, or the development of personal faculties, the formation of moral character rather than getting mere knowledge or skill <sup>5</sup>. To him, education would have been a means to produce a culturally healthy society in which a man takes the necessary responsibility for himself.

What people in today's harsh competitive society have forgotten is the role of education in forming a sound character leading to a culturally healthy society. Eliot in "The Aims of Education" uses the term 'Education for good citizenship' :

By 'education for citizenship' we may mean training in the essential faculties which are necessary both in the conduct of one's personal affairs and in forming an opinion about public policy : the ability to reason, to weigh evidence, to decide how much one needs to know in order to make up one's mind, and the ability to perceive the fundamental moral differences of right and wrong and apply them.<sup>6</sup>

Eliot argues that 'good citizenship' is a moral concept ; by this, he might mean that those who apply their intellect to public affairs without any ethical basis cannot participate as good citizens. In other words, the good citizen is the man with maximum opportunities in a democratic society to manifest his goodness on the basis of his free will.

Eliot further argues that education for citizenship means the developing of social conscience.

... I have already suggested that 'social' conscience can only be a development of 'conscience' : the moment we talk about 'social conscience' must be based upon 'justice'. The separation in our minds which results simply from dwelling constantly upon the adjective 'social' may lead to crimes as well as errors. In the name of social justice we can excuse, or justify to ourselves, or simply ignore, injustice : in the name of social conscience we can do the same by conscience.<sup>7</sup>

Eliot would suggest that everyone should keep in mind how to behave morally as a good citizen in society. In a sense, Eliot's ideas of education cover every aspect of human lives. Historically speaking, Eliot was writing at a time when the educational system was regarded as a means to realize a wide variety of social ideals.<sup>8</sup>

It is generally argued that in Eliot's time, because of the development of industry and technology, man was regarded as a means of producing goods, and as a result man was alienated from the human community. Bantock discusses the relationships between such a social situation and the educational system.

The imposition of universal schooling on the total population had been

accomplished in England toward the latter part of the nineteenth century — to be precise, in the decade 1870-80. It had sprung out of a mixture of idealism and calculation — idealism concerned with the ultimate possibilities of rationality among men, once they had achieved the literacy necessary to lead them to ideas based on reason, and calculation arising out of the growing technical and bureaucratic needs of the developing industrial society. As might have been expected, calculation prevailed, especially in the desire to deliver the goods at the least possible cost.<sup>9</sup>

Bantock further discusses the ways in which a system of education reflected the state's needs because of industrialism at that time ; hitherto the ideal education had been found in the family in Europe.

The setting up of a system of education had been the first great act of state collectivism ; it was to develop increasingly into an instrument of state policy. The pressures, in the West at least, were economic rather than directly political ; nevertheless, in being economic they became inevitably partly political. So the relative claims of the individual and society were raised by implication. The life of the family, for instance, had already suffered diminution ; education was no longer to be domestic but institutional. Increasingly the family was regarded not as the primary force in the cultural life of the next generation, but as a help or a hindrance in the business of uprooting the young from its influence. Even what and how much were to be learned were, to some degree, dependent on the 'needs' of the state.<sup>10</sup>

These two passages cited above reflect some of the basic issues which attracted educationalists' attention. There can be no doubt that such basic issues of education form the background against which Eliot's educational theories grow up.

Facing the issues of cultural breakdown and man's alienation in a

society, Eliot seems to stress a system of education based on classicism and a Christian culture, and to suggest that such an educational system forms the collective consciousness for a good citizen in a healthy society.

Bantock states the opinion that an educational system of this kind would create a mutually interacting community and thus train up the true conscience of the nation.<sup>11</sup> This would accord with Eliot's view in the following passage.

A nation's system of education is much more important than its system of government ; only a proper system of education can unify the active and contemplative life, action and speculation, politics and the arts.<sup>12</sup>

One of the confusing issues in Eliot's ideas on education concerns the transmission of culture through education. Eliot would suggest that the transmission of unconscious elements cannot easily take place in school. He might be thinking that school is so mechanical that the unconscious elements would simply not be transmitted.<sup>13</sup> The following passage strongly suggest as much :

The primary channel of transmission of culture is the family : no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree, of culture which he acquired from his early environment.<sup>14</sup>

It is only to be expected that such fundamental feelings and attitudes are to be transmitted through the family.<sup>15</sup> Eliot argues :

If we agree that the primary vehicle for the transmission of culture is the family, and if we agree that in a more highly civilised society there must

be different levels of culture, then it follows that to ensure the transmission of the culture of these different levels there must be groups of families persisting, from generation to generation, each in the same way of life.<sup>16</sup>

To Eliot, the family would be an ideal place to produce an independent man equipped to go out into a mutually interacting community. It is to be concluded that the family should play an important role in a system of education that hopes to produce a citizen manifesting his qualities in society. We also should not forget that the views on education proposed by Eliot have much to do with such primary feelings as religion, covering as they do the whole of human society.

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#### Notes

- 1 T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company), pp. 182-183.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 182.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- 5 G. H. Bantock, *T. S. Eliot and Education* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 80.
- 6 T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic and other writings* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 89.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 8 Bantock, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 12 *Ibid.*

- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.
- 14 Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, p. 115.
- 15 Bantock, *op. cit.*, p. 87.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 68.