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ESSENTIALISM AND SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTIONISM IN INDIA¹

The world of pedagogical ideas is extremely rich. From the perspective of Theodore Brameld's anthropological typology, there are four patterns of educational behaviour: perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, and reconstructionism. Essentialism and social reconstructionism play the major role in adult education in India and therefore both will be presented in this article in the context of adult education and lifelong learning. It should be noted that India serves as an example of Brameld's theory of educational ideology. Thus, the use of the ideology of essentialism aims to explain the essence of this ideology by means of a specific example, while the presentation of the ideology of social reconstructionism, which is only a postulate, can demonstrate how reforms in adult education can trigger change in the entire society.

Will Indian schools dare to build a new social order? This could be the paraphrase of George S. Counts' question, which nobody has been able to answer until now. According to the 2001 census, about 46 percent of women in India were illiterate. The corresponding figure for men was 24 percent². This was mainly due to the elitist educational policy, which for

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² See *International Literacy Statistics: A Review of Concepts, Methodology, and Current Data*, Montreal 2008.

centuries favoured mainly the caste of the Brahmins. This continued until the nineteenth century, i.e. until the conquest of India by Great Britain.

In the first period of British colonization, the British did not want the Indians to get acquainted with European culture. They knew that learning about it can lead to changes in the mentality of the natives and cause unforeseen consequences. In 1792, the director of the East India Company said:

We lost America precisely as a result of our own madness, accepting the establishment of schools and colleges. We should not repeat post-Christian mistakes, when the establishment of various types of schools led to the spread of the English language and consequently to a mental revival. Thanks to the traditional model of British education, the Hindus, having familiarised themselves with the classical European culture, came to appreciate its value. Occidental, i.e. pro-European groups consisting of representatives of higher castes, maintained close contacts with the colonists and embraced the conviction of the superiority of European culture imposed by the English. The European models imposed on them were easily assimilated through education³.

The British Crown needed senior and junior officials as instruments for managing the Indian Empire. There was no need to educate scientists or engineers; general humanistic knowledge was sufficient for the British administration. In 1857 the Universities of Mumbai, Calcutta and Madras were established as branches of British universities and their unified curricula were adapted to the requirements of the University of London. There was therefore no domestic education system in India and the British did not try to distinguish between the way of education in and outside the British Isles within the empire. The British did not see the need for establishing primary schools, either. Parents wishing to educate their children employed private teachers. The British administration did not want to spend money on education and did not change this position until the end of its rule⁴.

³ Z. Krawczyk, *Rabindranath Tagore – poszukiwanie prawdy i piękna w teorii i praktyce wychowania*, Warszawa 1990, p. 22.

⁴ See D. Rothermund, *Indie. Nowa azjatycka potęga*, Warszawa 2010, p. 228 (English edition: D. Rothermund, *India: The Rise of an Asian Giant*, Cambridge 2009).

Under British rule, the prevailing belief was that proper Indian education should include the humanities, natural sciences and English, i.e. subjects that could bring economic benefits to the British Crown. The main problem for the Indians was the introduction of discipline into schools to which the Indians were not accustomed. Benches, exams, classes taking place according to a fixed schedule and the omniscient teacher were unknown in traditional Indian gurukul-based education. The aim of essentialist teaching was to prepare people to take up intellectual challenges, to act as good citizens of the British Crown and to dedicate their careers to the British. Even the demand to facilitate the education of the Indians with outstanding intellectual skills in England found its confirmation. Those who wanted to hone their skills had the chance to study at the best universities in Britain, the best examples of which were Gandhi and Tagore.

In line with the principles of essentialism, British teachers sought to pass on to their Indian students the cultural models they had themselves inherited from their ancestors. These were, then, not Indian but European models, often misunderstood and not internalized by the pupils. The traditional teaching model was based on both encyclopaedic knowledge that the student had to assimilate and on cultural transmission, without any confrontation with current economic, social or political issues.

Over the last few decades, India has experienced a crisis in the traditional model of teaching. In 2009, the Indian Parliament mandated the state with providing a place at school to all Indian children. The right to education was granted to children who had never attended school; some due to their parents' insufficient interest in this matter, others due to lack of space in schools. In poorer, overpopulated neighbourhoods or villages, the school network is insufficient and children have difficulty enrolling. They often do not have the documents required by the school authorities, not least because they were born in a place where no one issued birth certificates. The level of education in unpaid primary schools is very low. There are no qualified teachers, teaching aids, electricity, toilets, classrooms, and drinking water. Most children do not pass state exams, many resit them, which disqualifies them and pushes them to the margins of society. Primary education has been affected by high drop-out rates of pupils who have

completed just a few classes or have repeated the same class for many years to eventually leave school and join an army of cheap, uneducated labour or the unemployed. The ideology of essentialism cannot, therefore, meet such demands⁵.

In modern times, there has been a confrontation in India between two concepts of man, two concepts of education: essentialism and reconstructionism. The philosophy of essentialism with its concepts of the micro-world, the human being and the goals of existence has clashed with social reconstructionism oriented towards action and rebuilding of social and economic life. As Brameld states, the world, and therefore India, are at a crossroads. Social struggle takes place between conservative and progressive forces, represented by the countless poor from the Third World⁶. In the second half of the 20th century, with decolonization, marginalised people began to come to the fore; the voiceless and invisible became audible. As a result, the traditional model of education, in line with the principles of essentialism, ceased to meet the needs of Indian society. Researchers began to wonder how the world should look like in a crisis, what to do with the multitude of illiterate people and children not attending schools, what place the teacher occupies in this discourse and to what extent state institutions are responsible for it. The ideology of reconstructionism can provide answers to such questions. By changing the discourse of the majority groups in favour of the marginalised, educational strategies and programmes should be developed aimed at reforming the society. This will not be possible unless people are made aware of the importance of developing adult education and lifelong learning.

To overcome the crisis, one should not blindly stick to the cultural models inherited from the British; the Indians must examine their heritage carefully and identify the most valuable elements that will allow them to find their bearings in the new reality. The task of the school, according to the idea of social reconstructionism, is to critically examine the legacy of a civilization and to indicate those components that will be useful during the reconstruction of the society.

⁵ See *Economic Survey 2010*, Government of India.

⁶ See H. Zielińska-Kostyło, *Rekonstrukcjonistyczne koncepcje zmiany społecznej poprzez edukację*, Toruń 2005.

Education in the spirit of reconstructionism should include not only a critical review of cultural heritage, but also the introduction the lifelong learning process, the instilling of planning skills to guide cultural conversion and the testing of cultural change projects through the implementation of planned social reform. According to Counts, all aspects of human existence, i.e. work, pay, property, sexual life, family, political system, ethnic or racial origin, war and peace, should be reconstructed via education. Reconstructionists assume that all differences, whether in terms of wealth, race, colour of the skin or religion, should not generate inequality of opportunity, as this would contradict the fundamental principles of democracy⁷.

According to the theory of social reconstructionism, universal education is to awaken in the individual a hitherto marginalized sense of competence and social usefulness, to instil attachment to the ideals of equality, dignity, fraternity, and freedom, to encourage respect for democratic processes in initiating discussion, for making critical assessments and taking decisions, to foster a mentality characterized by honesty and an academic approach, and to cultivate the conviction that talent, qualifications and virtues of character should be valued. The only way to unlock the potential of the Indians is not to tear them out of the shackles of tradition, but to introduce them to a living and evolving culture⁸.

The National Literacy Mission (NLM) was established in the 1980s to combat adult illiteracy. Its main task is to teach adults how to write and read as well as to implement the idea of continuous education. The most popular forms of adult education in India are: religious festivals, processions, local art, puppet theatre, and folk songs. NLM activities are focused on the problems of adults, women, states with the highest illiteracy levels, tribal areas and ethnic minorities, the untouchables, and marginalized groups. In 1999, UNESCO awarded the NLM for outstanding achievements in fighting illiteracy.

The theory of development is akin to reconstructionism; the former's educational theorists want to hand over power to the ecologically and politically handicapped population. Unlike the theories

⁷ See G. L. Gutek, *Philosophical and Ideological Perspectives on Education*, Boston 1997, p. 308-309.

⁸ See *Ibidem*, p. 315.

formulated in the 1960s, when top-down modernisation by central government was promoted, currently emphasised is the importance of grassroots initiatives taken by people who want to put their ideas and plans into practice at the local level. School can spearhead social change and reform. Teachers and pupils should engage in action- and solution-oriented research. This is based on the belief that there is a close relationship between school and society. Unresolved conflicts and tensions within the wider community are transferred to the school, teachers and pupils. For example, if Indian students are poor, hungry or discriminated against, their attitudes, aspirations and expectations about education can be distorted and lead to dropping out of school. The role of this institution is therefore to help diagnose society, to identify the key problems which contribute to the cultural crisis, as well as to instil the skills and attitudes which will successfully tackle these problems.

The discrepancy between the official rhetoric of the Indian authorities and the actual education policy is intriguing. The Constitution recommends the introduction of compulsory primary education, but no one has abolished child labour. Politicians call it a sad necessity; according to experts, children work in every third family and the income earned by minors accounts for 20 percent of India's GDP. The regulation that prohibits the employment of children under the age of fourteen is not enforced. It is common for children to be employed as servants even if they are under the age of ten⁹.

Will the social reconstructionists manage to change the sad reality of the Indian citizen? The British educational programme and the spread of Western education were intended to install and strengthen the imperial power. The British did not intend to raise leaders or to educate people for industry or those able to defend their homeland; they did not try to educate a self-determined nation. This opportunity is offered by social reconstructionism. Citizens of India have the opportunity to decide for themselves, to give voice to those who have been marginalised so far, to reform their education on their own terms, according to their own ideas and values. Instead of translating

⁹ See K. Dębicki, *Konflikt i przemoc w systemie politycznym niepodległych Indii*, Warszawa 2006, p. 101.

Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Dewey, etc., they can take a closer look at the view of Krishna, Buddha, Mahavira, Tagore, Gandhi, Giju Bhai, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, and Radha Krishna.

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Abstract:

In modern times two conceptions of man and two concepts of education, essentialism and reconstructionism, clashed in India. The philosophy of essentialism with the concept of man and the purpose of existence collided with a reconstructionist-oriented social action and transformation of social and economic life. As indicated by Brameld, the world and therefore India are at a crossroads. Social struggle takes place between the conservative and progressive forces, represented by the poor in the Third World countries.

Keywords:

essentialism, social reconstructionism, Theodore Brameld, pedagogy, India