EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL SCIENCE: A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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Knowledge is an 'invention' behind which lies something completely different from itself: the play of instincts, impulses, desires, fear and the will to appropriate. Knowledge is produced on the stage where these elements struggle against each other: Knowledge is always in bondage, dependent and interested.

(*The Gay Science* by Friedrich Nietzsche)

From axiomatic proclamations like 'knowledge is virtue' and 'knowledge is power' to its more recent taxonomic treatment, the discourse on knowledge has remained as problematic as ever. The continuous 'success story' of the scientific revolution since the 17th century has given it a uniform, single dimensional conceptual, methodological and institutional slant. The modern era is overawed by the fruits of scientific progress to the extent that positive experimental science method has become a standard explanatory model for all forms and kinds of knowledge.

The contemporary dissatisfaction with the view that there is only one reliable form of knowing, however, has thrown up the need to redefine 'knowledge'. The dictionary definitions generally include under this head all shades of meaning like direct perception, apprehension, understanding, learning, erudition, etc. However, when we inquire into the related issues of meaning, form and modes of knowledge, the diversity and complexity of the issue become obvious. The recent trends in semiotology, the speech act theory, the discourse analysis and the post-modern concept of power-knowledge nexus have further problematized the concept of knowledge.

Protagoras' declaration, at the initial stages of Greek thought, that 'man is the measure of all things' was a crucial indicator to the

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importance of human subject in the possibility of knowledge. Subject and object, knower and the known, man and universe, have remained fundamental categories of knowledge throughout the successive stages of the development of intellectual history of man. Man as 'the inventor not only of laws, theories ..... institutions ..... of entire world view ..... is the inventor of the entire forms of life" (Feyerabend-38). The thesis that all knowledge is humanly ordered reflects closely on the various ways in which human experience is understood and categorized. For, it is the knowing subject who plays the central role in how different kinds of phenomenon, e.g. physical, social, human, artistic, etc. are known. Knowledge, of course, is not mere collection of disparate information, but is linked to complex ways of understanding which man devises. Since knowers are the bearers of knowledge, it is said that there can be no knowledge without knowing subjects. The subject gets to know the object in line with the epistemic relation that operates between the two. This gives rise to, what for want of a more appropriate word, is termed as 'forms of knowledge'. With the help of words, gestures, propositions and 'gaps' *(differance)* man builds formal structures of knowledge. Propositions and sets of public symbols express these forms or modes of knowledge as concepts. The human experience becomes intelligible when these knowledge forms are structured.

P.H. Hirst has claimed that knowledge grows in distinctive ways while following a four-fold criteria: (Fayerabend: pp.128-129)

(a)   Central concepts that are peculiar in character to form;

(b)   A network of possible relationships in which experience can be understood;

(c)   Particular techniques and skills for exploring experience and testing their distinctive expressions; and

(d)   Testability against experience.

These forms of knowledge or disciplinary areas, for the sake of convenience, are structured as mathematics, physical science, social science, fine arts, literature, etc. Such an organization of knowledge

obviously serves particular and theoretical interests of analysis and understanding.

One may generally agree with Hirst's criteria for organizing knowledge. However, his controversial stand that every form of knowledge is to be tested against experience needs critical examination. The criterion obviously includes the possibility of carrying out experiments so characteristic of physical science's concern for measurement and quantification, observation and objectivity. Scientific knowledge is knowledge that has been systematically gathered, classified, related and interpreted. *The 'order' in the 'matter of fact' is ideally demonstrated in an experiment.*

Since the times of Francis Bacon (1564-1642), Galileo (1564-1642) and Kepler (1571-1630), experimental science has been ruling the roost in the world of knowledge. The perceived success of method of Newton (1642-1727) gave it the status of a paradigm. The 18th century as the age of Enlightenment extended the scope of science to social phenomena, the knowing mind and the nature of society. Later on, Karl Marx (1818-1883) made relations of production and economic structure of society the basis of social consciousness while J.S. Mill (1806-1873) subjected human thought, feeling and action to fixed laws of human nature. The rival hermeneutic tradition in the 19th century focused on interpretation and understanding by only shifting from a study of causes of behaviour to that of meaning of action. When we find Comte, Durkheim, Webber and Marx as grouped under the general label of Positivism, the claims to all forms of knowledge get justified only be an appeal to experience. Understandably, empiricism, rationalism and determinism of the Enlightenment project have converged on 'reproducing an order of things where each event must occur as it does, given its cause and the inexorable laws of nature' (Hollis-29). Indeed, in the 20th century, the scientific methodology as the dominant mode of knowing assumed revolutionary proportions. Social Sciences got submerged in the spate of advancing natural science and adopted the behavioural method of getting knowledge through causal observation in

which broad conclusions were drawn from a small number of facts. So, there is logic in the loud claim that *'Scientific Revolution was complete'* (Henry-112).

But, should scientific and quasi scientific modes of knowing be allowed to pre-empt the word 'knowledge'? Indeed, the social science disciplines like psychology, sociology, education, etc. emerged under the shadows of scientific revolution. Hence, the domination of ruling concepts of positive science like objectivity, prediction, certainty, data collection, observation, experimental method, etc. The implied consequence is the large scale application of mechanical principles in explaining human, social behaviour. If human beings are to be reduced into physical objects (machines), their behaviour may as well be governed by causal laws applicable on physiological processes. This, indeed is the essence of the reductionist programme evidenced in the 20th century state of the social science.

Institutionalization of natural (physical) sciences provided the governing model for social science research and led to what is known as 'reductionism'. The items on the reductionist agenda included among others the need to reduce social behaviour into the scientific mode of inquiry and the necessity to borrow physical science techniques and method for use in the social sciences. But such an agenda raises related issues of the peculiar nature of social phenomena, the scope of the reduction of all types of explanation to the causal-behavioural brand and the limits of the physical science theory model as applied in the social sciences.

Apparently, the nature of a human being differs fundamentally from the properties of an atom. For example, psychological (mental) processes, freedom of choice, moral purpose, complexity of social phenomena, role of customs and conventions in learning of human behaviour resist reduction of a human being into factual data. It is obvious that hypothetico-deductive method can have only a limited role to play in the world of human action. Social context is qualitatively different and not entirely amenable to methods and concepts of natural

science. The role of theory, in this context can, at best, be seen in the constricted role of approximate generalization rather than of universally and necessarily acceptable explanation. The shifting nature of explanation in the social sciences refused to be reduced into a paradigmatic model of the physical science. What is, therefore, required is the reduction of theoretical explanatory model to the needs of the social sciences and not the other way round.

An alternative explanatory model – the philosophic one – is provided by Peter Winch in his epoch making work: *The Idea of a Social Science*. To begin with, he points out the similarity of nature of philosophy and social science. Unlike the strictly Logical Positivistic view, he refuses to confine philosophy to the methodological role of clarifying concepts and removing contradictions from the realm of discourse. While dealing with such peripheral disciplines as philosophies of science, art, etc. Winch, on the contrary, finds them rooted firmly in the core philosophical areas of epistemology and metaphysics. While comparing the experimental and *apriori* ways of investigating reality, he argues that:

> Whereas the scientist investigates the nature, causes and effects of particular real things and processes, the philosopher is concerned with the nature of reality as such and in general ..... which takes us beyond pure science ..... it is not an empirical question at all, but a conceptual one. It has to do with the *force of the concept of reality* .... the force of the philosophical question cannot be grasped in terms of the preconceptions of experimental science. It cannot be answered by generalizing from particular instances since a particular answer to the philosophical question is already implied in the acceptance of those as 'real'.
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> (Winch, pp. 8-9)

The crux of Winch's argument lies in the stand that philosophy is not concerned with proving or disproving the existence of the world of

external objects but rather to elucidate the concept of externality. Now, elucidating a concept, for him, is focused on two questions: (i) how far reality is intelligible? (ii) what is the relation between language and reality? So the philosopher's interest lies not in clearing up linguistic confusions but in 'the solutions of confusions about the nature of language in general' (Winch-p.12).

Wittgenstein's stand (in the *Tractatus*) on relation between language and the world logically implies that a philosophical treatment of language really is a discourse about what counts as belonging to the world. Reality is thus presented in the form of language as concepts provide us with the form of the experience of the world. Therefore, understanding reality is hinged upon the use and meaning of concepts as employed in language. The question about intelligibility of reality, thus, is primarily an epistemological question as it comprises of meaning and understanding and how one captures the sense of something. Indeed, the criteria of intelligibility may differ in science, art, religion, etc. Still the task of epistemology shall remain crucial, i.e. to 'describe the conditions which must be satisfied if there is to be any criteria of understanding at all' (Winch-p.21).

The role assigned to meaning and language makes it possible for Winch to claim that important theoretical issues of social science can be settled philosophically by *'apriori'* conceptual analysis rather than by empirical research (Winch-p.17). But, how this epistemological endeavour is linked to an understanding of social life? Since social relations are expressions of ideas (through concepts) about social reality, one must look into how these ideas (concepts) are formed. *Prima facie*, it involves understanding the situation (through the concept of understanding) in which one lives one's life.

Human society is a pre-requisite to learning of any language. Social behaviour is contingent upon how one is brought up in a society where he learns a language from others, who correct their mistakes and teach them the conventions of language and society. Social behaviour is deemed to be 'correct or incorrect' and not as 'getting it right or wrong'.

It is not casually regular, rather it is rule governed. Meaning is the basic category of our social discourse and human action can only be grasped by getting hold of its meaning as it is expressed in concepts and language. Meaningful action is intelligible only because of its meaningfulness and rule guidedness.

Physical phenomena are characterized by regularity, uniformity, clarity and continuity. Social life is full of irregularities, discontinuity, pauses and ambiguities which language expresses in the form of signs, gestures, gaps, metaphors, silence, etc. Their internality is of the nature of ideas and they 'can more profitably be compared to the exchange of ideas in a conversation than to the interaction of forces in a physical system' (Winch-p.128). An event's character as an act of indiscipline is intrinsic to it in a way in which an event's character as a bomb explosion is not. This is because social behaiour is bound up with a variety of attitudes like desires, expectations, prejudices which are embodied in concepts. This loosely knit social life can only be grasped in a vaguely constructed intelligibility. Unlike behavioural inquiry, social science knowledge is alive, shifting and context bound. This vague, complex, contextual moment of social knowledge can only be grasped by an insight into the total phenomenon.

The growing discontent with positivist trends in the social sciences has led to the contemporary interest in discourse theory. Discourse is considered to be synonymous with the entire social system. As, for example, Jacques Derrida claims that 'when language invaded the universal problematic ..... everything became discourse' (Derrida-p.280). Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe use discourse to emphasize that every social configuration is meaningful, in which case 'the discursive is co-terminus with the being of objects' (1987-p.84). Unlike empirical frameworks, the 'grammar' of the use of concepts needs theoretical contexts. Discourse theory, in a way, is a logical extension of analogy between language and social relationships. The 20th century *'linguistic turn'* has shifted the emphasis towards *'language in use'* and *'talk and text in context'* (Van Dijk, 1997-p.3). Derrida's conception of discourse

as text or writing in which social experience is structured as logic of *difference* and Foucault's discourse analysis point out that discourse and discursive practices are linked to institutions implying thereby that these are synonymous with systems of social relations. Foucauldian concept of power-knowledge nexus and his discussion of discipline and inter-discipline have brought to bear an entirely new light on social sciences with far reaching implications for the status of human knowledge.

A comprehensive view of education as a field of knowledge testifies to the fact that it is not merely a natural phenomenon. From whatever angle you look at it, it tends to focus on the individual human being and on human societies. Then, there is the cultural aspect to be taken into account. Both the one who benefits from education (the target, the taught) as well as the one who carries it out (the educator) are human beings. They are essentially, therefore, not subject to the methods of natural (physical) science. All social phenomena are meaningful and meaning is to be looked for in or through language and not in behaviour alone. As Holis points out truth is not prior to interpretation "To describe what we experience we must apply concepts ..... concepts are never merely dictated by phenomena since they are involved in classifying even phenomena" (Holis-p.70-71). The contemporary discourse theory has further highlighted the non-behavioural underpinnings of social relations. In the recent emergence of globalized, 'market logic', the relation between "teacher, student and curriculum is reconstituted as relationship between producer, consumer and commodity" (Ahier and Esland-p.191). So, a new attempt at interpreting, explaining and analyzing education as a social science is very much called for.

Social science, placed in the new perspective and seen in the light of contemporary explanatory models, has far reaching implications for education as a discipline. Generally, it has emerged as an issue of social science foundations of education (Martusewieze & Renolds-pp. 103). Education as a hybrid discipline, perforce, leans heavily for both its content and methodology, on such social sciences as Psychology, Sociology, Economics, History, etc. Therefore, recent developments in

understanding social science as a distinct form of knowledge, have significant ramifications for education. Different theory paradigms, e.g., general theory and discourse theory, etc., designed and modeled in the contemporary philosophical explanatory tradition become relevant. This is the reason why crucial issues of educational discourse focused at the turn of the 21st century are globalism, feminist theory, multiculturalism, critical pedagogy, etc. Hence, the recent shift in the definitional perspective to what is termed as "the plastic sense of education", understood as "interaction with ..... society" (Matheson or Grosvenor- p.2). Consequently, rigid and constricting study methods peculiar to positive science, viz., experimentation, etc. are giving way to the techniques like linguistic analysis, intertextuality and discourse analysis. (Ball, J.B. (Ed.) *Foucault and Education* 1990, Trend. The *Crisis of Meaning in Culture and Education* 1995).

McClellan very succinctly parallels education with social science: " ..... education is clearly an object for study by the social sciences. Indeed, an understanding of education ..... is the major concern of all social sciences ..... everything we might want to know about education should be found in or by some branch of the social sciences." (McClellan J.E.-p.12). Taking education strictly as a social science discipline, the need to develop its own (new) explanatory model, methods and techniques distinct from those of physical science gets emphasized. This paradigm shift* has important implications for education as a discipline, organization of disciplinary knowledge (curriculum), educational research as well as educational discourse.

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* A paradigm consists of a set of guiding principles or basic tenets about the broad character of nature and how it is to be studied. Paradigms are never immutable; hence they are liable to shifts. Paradigms are anchored on reasoned debate. However, a paradigm shift is likely to go with deep shifts in the distribution of power in the wider society. The sociology of knowledge comes into play when paradigms are found to be beyond the epistemic reach of reason and expression. So, the very existence of paradigms suggests that what is regarded as rational activity is itself as much a social as well an intellectual affair.

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