

## Education to Human Rights: Salesian Education for Community Empowerment and Emancipation

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### Abstract

This paper intends to gauge how far the Salesian educational projects have contributed to individual development on one hand and to community emancipation on the other. It tries to argue that while the Salesian educational enterprises have helped individuals to climb the economic and social ladder, it has failed to emancipate and empower communities which those individuals have been drawn from. It also argues that Educating the Human Rights way will flag off an educational mission that will ensure that the Salesians educate not just individuals but emancipate and empower communities as well. While doing this, the Salesians will look back at the legacy bequeathed by the Church and the congregation.

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From the earliest period of human history education has been considered as an important tool for the development of humanity. And in the context of a non-egalitarian society where vast masses of humanity are deprived of their rightful share of resources and live in deprivation and marginalization education is a very potent and powerful tool for emancipation of such communities. We shall begin by tracing the educational legacy and commitment to Education.

### Church's Commitment to Education in Historical Perspective

Seeing education as a tool for development has been the practice of the Church in the early years and seeing it as a tool for emancipation has been the tradition of later years. Although the barbarian invasions and the chaos that prevailed in the Germanic kingdoms almost extinguished the light of learning at the outset of the Middle Ages, the ecclesiastical world, particularly the monasteries, still kept it alive. Christian education matured in the Middle Ages, with the Church as its principal guardian, the clergy its chief cultivators and disseminators. In this period, education and learning came to be recognized as means of salvation, and qualities, indispensable for the ministers in the Church. They were also considered as necessary tools, in the process of civilizing the barbarian nations, whom the Church Christianized. Over the centuries, there was a growth in the awareness of the Church, as regards the importance of elementary education, for the full flowering of human life, and its potential in the economy of salvation. If Catholics were not leaders in the field of educational theory between the 16th and 19th centuries, they were extremely active in educational practice. They made

a notable effort to extend a practical and methodically sound education to many who had heretofore been denied its advantages.

### **Don Bosco's Educative Intervention in the Church**

The role of Don Bosco, and the relevance of his educative intervention, is to be against this background. What was that led to Don Bosco, the Italian priest of 19th century to devote himself to, education rather than to other forms of pastoral activity? His limited, but intense awareness of the way young people were affected by the social conditions in the Sardinian States, in Piedmont, and in Liguria, and of the measures needed in response, could have led him to either of two quite different strategies. He could have decided that renewal and development of education was the best, even the only remedy, since all lasting social progress is achieved only through the progress of individual people. This was the strategy supported by numerous thinkers which led to the foundation of many congregations on behalf of the young in the aftermath of the Council of Trent. He could, on the other hand, have concluded that a change in education could not be his prime target since the goals of education are determined by the political powers-that-be, and not vice-versa. That was precisely the dominant view in the 19th century, especially in the second half of the century.

Having thus rejected the political option, Don Bosco supported whole heartedly those who concentrated on education. His conviction was that only education leads a person to know, love and internalize the ideas worthy, of man, in accordance with a strict hierarchy of values. Consequently, he assigned to education a twofold finality the first of which was strictly spiritual: to teach the truth re-garding faith and morals in order to help man achieve salvation; and, secondly, to form honest citizens by providing them with professional qualifications. Among the other educators, and societies, founded for the education of the young, his originality consisted in making education depend on affection, expressed in a way that was perceptible, uninhibited and genuine.

### **The Indian Salesian Legacy: Education for Development and Empowerment**

In India, Salesians have been involved in the educational field for well over a century (since 1906). While Salesians have been involved and are recognized as important stake holders and role models in running elite educational institutions (Don Bosco, Matunga, Mumbai, Don Bosco, Egmore, Chennai, Don Bosco, Park Circus, Kolkata, Don Bosco, Delhi, Don Bosco, Panjim, Goa, St. Antony's, Shillong, Don Bosco, Guwahati, Assam etc.) our primary target group has been the socially, economically and educationally marginalized sections of society.

### **The Beginnings in Tirupattur**

Our engagement with the marginalized communities in North Arcot District, in and around Vellore the headquarters and Tirupattur, the cradle of Salesian India, mirrors the conviction of the early Salesian Missionaries and the dreams they had for those

marginalized communities. One person who more than anyone else personified that dream and vision is Fr. Carreno. Fr. Panampara Abraham, who was first on the staff of the College as a practical trainee and then later on as its celebrated Principal has this to say of Fr. Carreno,

In 1949, Fr. Carreno who was the Provincial then, visited Tirupattur and giving a 'Good night' talk had this to say 'I have seen how the poor especially our Christians who are mostly harijans are treated in the villages. They do not have even the right to wear their foot-wear in the streets where the upper castes live. We shall start a college here, educate our Christians. And I look forward to the day when Brahmin boys will come to the feet of a harijan for learning.'<sup>1</sup>

That's our earliest Legacy, a legacy we share with Salesians all over India, a legacy where education is seen as a powerful tool for emancipation of the marginalized.

P.E. Abraham went on to add

This dream or shall we say prophesy was fulfilled almost literally. When I went back to Sacred Heart College as the Principal Mr. Isaac from Polur came with three students seeking admission for them. I had taught Isaac when I was there many years earlier as a practical trainee. The boys were not Christians and I refused to take them. Isaac then told me that they were his students and he had given them tuition because of which they had obtained better grades than the others.<sup>2</sup>

Most initiatives in educational ministry which followed remained true to this dream. When there were tendencies to see education as an end in itself, corrective measures were taken especially after the Special General Chapter. The desire to be true to our charism and the influence of Liberation Theology helped to sustain the thrust for using education as a tool for empowerment.

The taking up technical education both formal and informal, setting up schools in areas populated by the poor, areas where education was inaccessible to the marginalized such examples stretching across the length and breadth of Salesian India prove beyond a doubt that Salesians in India always believed in using education as the most important tool for the emancipation of the poor.

While it is amply evident that lives of thousands of poor girls and boys have changed for the better both economically and socially on account of the educational interventions one is not so sure if such changes have empowered or emancipated the communities these girls and boys have come from. Partly designed as an inquiry into this question a survey was done in the region of Hyderabad and it came up with some interesting findings. The findings confirm the claim that we do work for the poor and such an

<sup>1</sup> As told to this author in an interview while preparing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

education is our hall mark. But the survey also raises important issues. And the most important of them is “Is the education an emancipatory tool for communities of the marginalized?”

### **Issues that Emerge from the Survey and Questionnaire:**

The following are an average summation of the findings that emerge from the survey conducted in the region.

#### **Access to Catholics**

The percentages of Catholics/Christians who have access to our educational institutions are much higher than those obtaining similar institutions by other religious orders or diocesan authorities. Despite this and % of Catholics in our institutions is just over 23%.

#### **Access to the Scheduled Castes**

The percentage of Scheduled castes in our institutions is again much higher than other such similar institutions still far below the desired percentage when we consider that there is a pledge to be redeemed.

#### **Access to the Poor**

The access for the poor to our schools is very limited unless there are boarding houses attached to the school. The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions addressed to 22 leaders of communities. The questions could be categorized under the headings given below:

Why the School/Technical - Formal/Non-formal?	03 Questions
What's good/bad about the school?	12 Questions
What is the policy followed for admission?	03 Questions
What are the success indicators?	02 Questions
What purpose does a hostel serve?	06 Questions
What is the impact of the school/hostel?	10 Questions
How has the school/hostel promoted empowerment of the girl child?	03 Questions
What should be the main focus of the school-educate as many poor as possible or empower the community from which the students come?	01 Question

### **The Reason for Starting the School**

To the first question – why was the school started, 65% of the respondents said that it was to educate the poor / poor Catholics / to empower the poor. When asked what should additionally have been the motive for starting the school another 25% responded that empowering the community should have been an added reason for starting the school but the other important reasons cited were Financial support for the mission, Acceptability in the locality, to impart the values, to empower the poor and needy, Evangelize through education, to support education of the girls, to impart D.Bs' style of education and to be in touch with the upper class!!!

When asked if they were to start all over again would they start the school for the same reasons, 55% said that they would start similarly and for similar reasons.

### **Three Positive Aspects of the School**

Asked what the three positive aspects of the school were, 60% of respondents replied that it is the education we offer to the poor catholic and non-catholic children. 30% - its efficiency.

### **Required Changes**

Responding to the question, which three changes would one like to bring about in the present way of running the school additionally 33% replied that they would give access to as many poor children as possible to the services of the school.

Asked if one were to retain only three things about the character of the school what characteristics would one retain 55% replied that they would retain the character of the school being a home for the underprivileged.

### **What is Best Liked and Disliked about the School by Different Sections of People**

When asked to respond to the question what one thought the people around like best about the school 35% replied that it is the aspect that the poor of the area have access to school. When asked what the rich dislike about the school 40% replied that it is the presence of poor and weak students in the class room as compared to other reasons accounting for 10% each. To the question what the poor like about the school 75% replied it is the access the poor have to the schools and its other services.

And to the question what the poor dislike, 50% replied it is the quantum of fees that we levy for studying in our schools despite the fact the school is meant for education of the poor. 55% of the respondents felt that one of the most important things that the parishioners appreciate is that they consider the school as theirs. 60% of the respondents felt that they do not get free education in the schools run by us.

### **Admission Policy**

To the question “Is there a policy with regard to reaching out to the poor” 60% of the respondents replied that no poor is denied admission. Other replies worded differently highlighted the fact reaching out to the poor is a criteria when it comes to admission to the school.

75% of the respondents affirmed that while we run educational institutions it is important to keep the focus on the poor. When asked what in the order of priority are the three criteria for admission to the school, giving admission to poor, combined with catering to those of the parish had 77% replying as very important.

### **Success Indicators**

Though while identifying success indicators of the school, good results ranks higher than access to the poor, 97% of the respondents replied that empowerment of the communities from which the poor students come should be an important indicator of the success of our educational interventions.

### **Attached Hostel**

While hostels attached to our schools are seen primarily as a way to enhance our evangelization ministry closely linked to the idea is the possibility we have to reach out to and empower the poor who are any way the bigger constituent of our believers.

### **Involvement of Past Students in Community**

The questions regarding the involvement of past students of both school and hostel getting involved in activities that benefit parish gives us some positive indicators; but those relate to the community at large the replies are hazy and much less defined. From the replies available it has not been possible to assess the impact of their education on their community

While 95% of the respondents said that students who pass out from the hostel do get involved in activities that benefit the parish only 55% felt that the same students are involved with their community. 71% of the respondents feel that these activities that the past pupils are involved in empower their respective communities. To the question how one could get the students who pass out from our institutions involved more in their communities’ empowerment process several suggestions were put forward like planning a better orientation for boarding students, Keeping personal contact with the students after they go out, Having regular meetings, Listening to them and finding out why students are not able to contribute, Along with academic instruction ensuring that real education takes place by inculcating values and Involving hostel students in literacy and other empowerment activities during the holidays.

### **Conclusions from the Questionnaire**

The responses to the questions, consistently proves that since the passing of time reaching out to the poor and their development as individuals and empowerment of the communities from which they come continue to be the core concerns for us in our engagement with educational interventions.

### **Issues that Cause Serious of Concern**

Despite the determination to remain steadfast to our legacy and not so mean achievements in retaining that legacy there are serious issues that we need to deliberate on.

Uppermost in the list is the realisation that the communities from which the students are drawn from continue to languish economically, socially, politically and from an internalised sense of inferiority and insecurity. Those who have succeeded in gaining economic and social mobility are seen as being alienated from the communities they come from both physically and psychologically. State withdrawal of financial support to minority institutions even in primary education – inability to get grant-in-aid – has compelled to start self-financing institutions. This has made education increasingly less accessible to the declared constituencies.

Similarly, market forces driving professional education beyond the reach of the poor challenges the providers of education to make themselves relevant to the educational aspirations of the poor and the marginalised. Changing paradigms in defining what a good, quality education is, has put salesian educators on the defensive regarding what we ourselves consider what a good education to be. This tends to increase the susceptibility to be co-opted in to the prevailing trends that commodify education. Despite the urgent need to engage in dialogue with secular forces in combating rising trends in the communalisation of education the minority character tends to distance away from this critical task.

### **The Question of Empowering Education**

How do we then address the question of making the educational initiatives a community empowering and emancipatory one?

The respondents to the questionnaire unequivocally replied that empowerment of marginalised communities from whom the students are drawn is an important indicator of the success of our educational project. However there is ambiguity in the respondents' replies whether this is indeed happening. It is true that more than half the respondents affirm that this is happening, though we need to hear it from the other side – the communities of the marginalised - as well.

What are the indicators to say that this process of empowerment is really taking place? Even before that, are we agreed that not just individual development but emancipation

of marginalised communities is the critical measure of the success of the educational project?

As I see it, Salesian educational interventions have been stand-alone initiatives targeting disadvantaged individuals and not the disadvantaged communities. Although meant to serve community needs, they have to a great extent benefited only individuals (and to some extent their immediate families) from the community. When the community in question is a very marginalized community - like the scheduled tribes and scheduled castes in the midst of a larger society - the individual's access to education and through it her / his upward mobility, has often been an alienating experience resulting in alienation of the individual from her / his own community, which continues to remain poor. Such an individual has seldom been able to stand up for her / his community or for those agents of her/his upward mobility.

### **Way Forward?**

I firmly believe Educating to Human Rights gives a way forward in this regard. Human Rights Education makes possible empowering, emancipatory education. Human Rights Education while reinforcing the rights and dignity of the individual embeds them in the aspirations of the community of the marginalized and the underprivileged. It makes students aware that an education that does not respond to dehumanization and exploitation of large sections of our population is no education at all. Human right education sensitizes, humanizes, questions inequalities, searches for answers to questions that need to be asked. It makes the privileged and the underprivileged to ask those questions together and it makes a world of difference. It questions the indifference of the privileged and invites the participation of the underprivileged in the process of emancipation.

Students from underprivileged sections especially the dalits and tribals and girl children particularly will come to learn their rights and also by simple practical interventions will be enabled through HRE to intervene already as children in the empowerment of their communities. It will also facilitate students from privileged sections to be part of these collective efforts. Together they will unlearn what they have been taught: "Today's children are tomorrow's citizens" and will learn how to be citizens of today.

### **The Andhra Pradesh Experience**

Since 2006 People's Action for Rural Awakening, in collaboration with the Institute of Human Rights Education, Madurai has been involved in Human Rights Education, particularly in government schools where mostly the underprivileged study. This effort has seen students from weaker sections getting involved in community empowerment particularly by making it possible to prevent incidence of child labour and children dropping out of schools.

The past years of experience and the credibility the programme has achieved paved the way for Rajiv Vidya Mission to undertake a 5 Day Residential Training Programme for their senior State Resource Persons and State Resource Group on Human Rights Education. Those trained took up the training of the District Resource Persons (DRPs) and the Mandal (block) Resource Persons (MRPs) and 1,67,000 government teachers across Andhra Pradesh and Telengana were oriented in human rights education. When the text books were up for revision lessons related to human rights were mainstreamed in class 8, 9 and 10th grades. We are thus on the threshold of a momentous breakthrough in empowering education, an education that will not only equip the students with academic competency but that which will also empower through the students their community as well! The training for the teachers facilitated setting up of human rights clubs in government schools. Today 32,550 students are members in 763 human rights clubs drawn from 541 schools spread over 77 blocks of 11 districts in the two states of Telengana and Andhra Pradesh. The members are engaged in activities that facilitate their access to their right to education and also in initiatives that empower their communities besides engaging themselves in national and international initiatives in protection and promotion of human rights and human development.

### **One Lesson to be Learned**

Thus Human Rights Education is a call to Salesian educational presences to move away from stand alone educational initiatives to a way of doing education that integrates the educand to the community they belong and maintain their connectedness to the community and its aspirations as a community. It will then usher in an educative environment that will promote cooperation over competition with one another, community goals over mere personal advancement goals, integration into rather than alienation from their community. Thus they can become agents of communities' empowerment, emancipation, shared dignity and future security. It is my firm belief that while extending educational service to a marginalized community such a service becomes emancipatory or non-emancipatory, alienating or integrating in direct proportion to the extent educational services are positioned within the overall goal of the community's identity, dignity, security and livelihood.

### **Conclusion**

Education to Human Rights or Human Rights Education is then the only way forward if we want to make our educative mission a tool for development and empowerment of communities that have long languished as outliers of society. In a world where inequalities and injustices become increasingly rampant any delay on embarking on this journey will only make our present educative models obsolete and self-defeating. As people dedicated to the enduring example of the One Who hoped for a more just and equitable world, a world where common good will be held in greater regard than individual advancement, a world where sisterhood and brotherhood should become the common denominator of our relationship, taking up this challenge can delay no more.