

Education for the people: Concepts of Grundtvig, Tagore, Gandhi and Freire

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Education for the people: concepts of Grundtvig, Tagore, Gandhi and Freire. Asoke Bhattacharya, foreword by J. H. Schjørring, Kolkata 2008, 240 pp.

Professor Asoke Bhattacharya of Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India, has in his latest book again concerned himself with Grundtvig. As with his 1993 work, *Empowering the Neoliterates*, this most recent book introduces Grundtvig, his life and thoughts to an international readership, and attempts to spread his philosophy beyond Denmark's borders.

This type of book was first recognised at the end of the nineteenth century, and first appeared outside Europe around the time of the First World War. After 1945 there was a new wave of interest in Grundtvig and the Third World. The Danish Grundtvig-scholar, K. E. Bugge, has categorised Grundtvig's thoughts regarding developments from World War I to the present day into three models: the import-model, the planting-model and finally the inspiration-model (*Education for the people* -hereafter *EP* – 77 ff).

Against this background Bhattacharya's new book is of great interest. Previous books on Grundtvig, concerning education and development, are very often written for academics by academics who bring their background to the tone of their books. Bhattacharya's book is the work of an academic written not only for academics but also for educators and social reformers.

Bhattacharya's other books range broadly from an introduction to existential philosophy to Che Guevara's life and thoughts. Through his study of Kierkegaard the professor developed an interest in nineteenth-century Denmark and Grundtvig, and for many years studied at the Centre for Grundtvig Studies at the University of Aarhus. His work in co-operation with other researchers gave fruition to a number of conferences, an anthology and series of articles. Six of these articles have been gathered together in this book with the addition of a completely new piece on Freire. This latest book presents four leading educators, and Grundtvig appears alongside Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and the Brazilian, Paolo Freire.

The particular value of the book is that readers are introduced to different forms of practice, in the fields of both pedagogics and social reform. The book begins with an introduction to Tagore's, Gandhi's and Freire's thoughts, particularly on adult education, followed by five chapters on Grundtvig and the Folk High Schools. The book finishes with a critical account of Freire's understanding of education as liberation – the only totally new section in the book. Professor Bhattacharya then describes the situation in India and Latin America, those places where adult education is necessary because of little or inadequate primary education, especially for girls. The four main types of adult education are not only an adaptation of Western models, but each one demonstrates an individual method of teaching and clearly shows that the author considers practice as central to development. The book not only aims to describe educational methods but also to demonstrate how these methods can effect social and political changes, local and national.

To what degree does the book live up to Professor Bugge's classification of models, and especially to his 'inspiration-model'? There is the promise of an ambitious book which both satisfies academic readers and gives new ideas for practical developmental work in India and other non-European areas.

The first impression is that Asoke Bhattacharya writes well and this is sustained throughout the book. Indeed, it is a fine example of the Anglo-Indian language, that of literature, administration and teaching, which has developed from colonial times up to the present day and which has an independent character in relation to British English. The accounts of the various popular educators are clear and lucid. Bhattacharya is skilful in faithfully summarising the thoughts of other people; and the chronological presentation in the introduction to Tagore, Gandhi and Freire makes it easy for the reader to form an impression of their life and work and to become both informed and engaged. When the author writes about Gandhi's ideas of education, he gives the reader a different view of a man primarily known in Denmark as a political spokesman for home-rule and self-sufficiency. An entry in the Danish *Salmonsens Leksikon* reveals that in the nineteen-twenties Tagore was known in Denmark not only as a lyrical poet and Nobel Prize winner, but also as a philosopher, educator and social reformer. A more recent evaluation, the relevant entry in *Den Danske Nationalencyklopædi*, indicates that in contemporary Denmark the focus is on his literary contribution: his other activities receive merely a mention. Probably the same is true outside Denmark's borders and if only for this reason, Bhattacharya's book is valuable as an introduction to Tagore's work.

But is the book itself an example of Bugge's inspiration-model? In the event, the reader's expectations are not fulfilled. The title *Education for the People* presumably makes subtle reference to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg speech, where the President speaks of "government of the people, by the people, for the people" and thereby indicates that the empowerment of the people – the Indian nation together with the peculiarity and diversity of their own culture – is an objective of the author. Yet the book does not so much as outline a future India inspired by Grundtvig's thoughts on general education and folk high schools. Nor indeed should it attempt to do so, some critics will assert: rather, it should simply introduce Grundtvig and the rest will follow. But then it might be counter-claimed that an Indian application of Grundtvig's ideas on education must either rest upon or lead to an independent interpretation of Grundtvig's writings: but here the book is of just as little help.

One positive aspect of the book is that the author is fortunately uninfluenced by the negative Danish cultural-radical criticism of Grundtvig in recent years. However, he too often lacks an alternative independent approach to Grundtvig's works. The book is so loyal to its influences that little room has been left for the necessary critique of them.

There is an abundance of references and quotations – some of which, however, are not clear. Where, for instance, Bhattacharya alludes extensively to K. E. Bugge (*EP*, 77-80), he fails to make clear in the notes to which of Bugge's texts he is referring. In the chapter 'Glimpses of Grundtvig's Thoughts on Education', summaries and quotations of other research are used for an interpretation of Grundtvig: hence it is not clear whether Bhattacharya is writing about Grundtvig himself or about research on Grundtvig. He cites the results and evaluations of earlier research on Grundtvig and then makes them his own, without clearly distinguishing Grundtvig from his interpreters. This practice of reference to the texts consulted affects not only the book's presentation, but also its format. On p. 234 one finds thirty-seven footnotes to the same work, and these references range from p. 3 to p. 34 of that work. Notes 39 and 49 contain, for example, three references to p. 14, three references to p. 15 and three to p. 17, after which note 49 follows with a reference to pp. 17-18. The notes do not go into analysis or discussion, but serve primarily to enhance the authority of the presentation.

The narrative element in the book is thus stronger than the analytical. One wonders whether oral presentations form the background to the individual articles. Narration goes hand in hand with the author's technique of juxtaposing quotations; and, when he should

express his own opinion, he allows the voices of Grundtvig scholarship to speak instead. The issue, therefore, is whether Professor Bhattacharya himself adopts a position on the social significance of these four thinkers, or whether he leaves the evaluation to others. He is a well-informed and knowledgeable reader. But it is precisely this well-informed reader's evaluation that is missing. Since there is so much talk of the 'inspiration-model' and since Bugge's words on the independent reception of Grundtvig are cited with approval, one could have wished for an approach to Grundtvig which could establish a background for such.

The book draws attention to features common to Grundtvig and the three other educationalists – for example, the fact that “Grundtvig, Tagore and Gandhi were of the opinion that the mother tongue should be the medium of education” (*EP*, 87). The book's last article, on Freire, gives a fine introduction to his dictum “from known to unknown” – “from the knowledge of the world and then again clarification of the knowledge of the world on the basis of acquired knowledge” (*EP*, 229) – but the perspective is wanting. Bhattacharya could have presented here not just a list of those similarities between Grundtvig and Freire which an external comparison reveals, but an analysis of those internal similarities to which, on the one side, Grundtvig's fight against mechanical and rote learning is a pointer. Learning must not be without perspectives, and being able to read is not the same as being able to understand.

Rather than repeating external similarities between Tagore, Gandhi, Grundtvig and Freire, Bhattacharya could have strengthened the comparative approach by an actual historical analysis of their work. Grundtvig (died 1872) is the oldest of the educators, Tagore and Gandhi were almost the same age and lived well into the twentieth century, and Freire was born after the First World War. Apparently, the four thinkers belong to different periods, but viewed more broadly they are all a part of that educational progression which is inextricably linked to the process of modernisation which began in Europe in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Professor Bhattacharya writes that India, in spite of the destruction of the traditional teaching ashrams during the period of colonisation, nevertheless – through “orally transmitted” popular education – “produced a number of great personalities between the 18th and early 20th centuries” (*EP*, 163); but one could say that none of these Indian personalities could have thought as they did without the meeting between India and Western Europe, one of the results of the colonial period. This is not an argument in support of European imperialism but it does point out the positive aspects to the meeting of cultures.

Tagore's strength as a thinker was in his ability to let Indian religion, the philosophy of religion and Western philosophy enter into a creative synthesis, which united pantheism with activity and social improvement.

Bhattacharya portrays how the "Bengali renaissance" formed the background to Tagore's thinking and activity, the reaction which followed "the euphoria of making money" (*EP*, 16) and the decay of ethics which was a result of this preoccupation with money-making. The "Bengali Renaissance" has "striking similarities to the Danish Golden Age" (*EP*, 56), he writes, but it directly affected only a very small part of the population. Perhaps it is more correct to say that Tagore and his forefathers from the eighteenth century underwent a development which corresponds to the time up to about 1800 in Denmark and the period which immediately followed. Tagore's aristocratic, upper-class family played a leading role in the "Bengali Renaissance" just as the Reventlows and the Bernstorffs did in Denmark in the same period. The background is the increased world trade, capitalism and the dynamism of which colonisation forms a constructive part on the way to the Enlightenment.

Today, the anti-religious characteristics of the Enlightenment are most often stressed, but the social reformers of the eighteenth century would also unite the philosophy of religion, the humanities and artistic activity with very practical measures for the improvement of the conditions of the rural populations.

Capitalism, modernisation and thoughts concerning education for high and low went hand in hand, and in Denmark long periods of peace strengthened trade and formed the background to advances in agriculture. Rather than being outraged at history and development – in a way often seen in twentieth-century debate – it is more important to concentrate on the contemporary actualities. Contextualisation of those popular educators, as well as an increased consciousness of their common horizon, could have lent greater momentum to the author's evaluation of the possible inspiration of "the Danish model" in an Indian context.

Asoke Bhattacharya wants to draw attention to the possibility of introducing into India the Danish-modelled co-operative movement which promotes the development of the individual village. But when he emphasises Gandhi's understanding that popular education should be coupled with traditional handicrafts – as opposed to Tagore's broader, cultural understanding of popular education – there is reason to point out the Danish co-operative movement's close connection with technical advances which increased production. For Danish readers, mention of Gandhi's interest in simple handicrafts prompts a

sceptical response to his unrealistic visions of self-sufficiency with primitive methods of production. Gandhi's symbolic value is greater than his real significance, for where popular education and development are concerned, reality is the test of all things.