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The Educational Principles of Mirra Alfassa (The Mother) on Child-rearing Practices

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Abstract:

Child is the basic constituent unit of a nation. The future of any country depends upon the health and well-being of its children. To some extent, the growth and development of a child depends upon the manner he/she has been raised by the family. If we can provide them the right opportunities to explore their full potential, they can contribute towards the social-economical and cultural growth of the nation. Hence, it is necessary to focus our attention towards the child-rearing practices and evaluate each and every aspect carefully.

The world knows Mother Alfassa as a spiritual guru and Mahayogini, but she was a great educationist as well. Through her diverse writings she formulated the principles of education which were utterly new and unconventional as unlike the traditional views, they aimed at exploring the true potentials of human beings and the nature of knowledge which liberates the soul from the darkness of ignorance and provides a way to understand the higher truth.

The present paper is a humble attempt to understand the educational principles of Mother Alfassa on child-rearing practices.

Keywords: Child Rearing Practices, Educational philosophy, Parenting, Child development, Spirituality.

Introduction

Child is the basic constituent unit of a nation. The future of any country depends upon the health and well-being of its children. To some extent, the growth and development of a child depends upon the manner he/she been raised by the family. If we can provide them the right opportunities

to explore their full potential, they can contribute towards the social-economical and cultural growth of the nation. Hence, it is necessary to focus our attention towards the child-rearing practices and evaluate each and every aspect carefully.

Though there is no standard definition of Child-rearing practices, as it varies from culture to culture, but most of the educationists do agree on the fact that it plays a crucial role in the holistic development of the child. Baumrind believes, the child-rearing practices are meant to capture normal variations in the parents' attempt to socialize with children (58). Bauchard defines child-rearing practices as the medium of '*transmission of the tradition, beliefs, culture and cognitive actions from parents to the off springs*'(1701). From these statements it is quite evident that the child rearing practices are essential for the holistic development of the child.

Though the world knows Mother Alfassa as a spiritual guru and Mahayogini, but she was a great educationist as well. Through her diverse writings she formulated the principles of education which were utterly new and unconventional as unlike the traditional views, they aimed at exploring the true potentials of human beings and the nature of knowledge which liberates the soul from the darkness of ignorance and provides a way to understand the higher truth (Mukherjee 5). In 1943, Mother Alfassa established a school in Pondicherry in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram to practice these principles of education, where rather than confining the goals of education solely on worldly aspects, the mother provided '*a wider and higher scope with far-reaching consequences for the future of humanity*'(Mukherjee 5). Mother Alfassa tried to explain the true nature of education which liberates us. Her goal was to create such an education system where '*children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their souls; education would be given not for passing examinations or obtaining certificates and posts but to enrich existing faculties and bring forth new ones*' (93).

Mother Alfassa was well aware of the fact that in order to create great human beings for the future we need to focus on the way they are nurtured by their parents to provide them with the necessary opportunities for their holistic development. For Mother Alfassa, children are a part of the supreme God who holds tremendous possibilities in them and only through right education and child-rearing practices these potentials can be explored to its full extent. That's why She



asserts, *'The education of a human being should begin at birth and continue throughout his life. Indeed, if we want this education to have its maximum results, it should begin even before birth; in this case it is the mother herself who proceeds with this education by means of a twofold action: first, upon herself for her own improvement, and secondly, upon the child whom she is forming physically'*(9).

Child Care

There is no denying the fact that mothers play a crucial role in the upbringing of their child. The care a child receives depends chiefly on the perception, skills, knowledge and abilities of the mother. The way a mother supports her child in every aspects of the development helps them develop trust, motivation and emotion. Mother Alfassa, in her writings on education gives paramount importance on the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of the mothers. She asserts, *'For it is certain that the nature of the child to be born depends very much upon the mother who forms it, upon her aspirations and will as well as upon the material surroundings in which she lives. To see that her thoughts are always beautiful and pure, her feelings always noble and fine, her material surroundings as harmonious as possible and full of a great simplicity- this is the part of education which should apply to the mother herself'*(9). Apart from providing the mother proper environment, Mother Alfassa also talked about the will on the part of the mother to form the child as receive it wholeheartedly as a gift from the Supreme being, as she believed the will of the mother affects the child's creation inside the womb. She said, *'And if she has in addition a conscious and definite will to form the child according to highest ideal she can conceive, then the very best condition will be realized so that the child can come into the world with his utmost potentialities'*(9).

Forms of Child Rearing Practices

Recent studies conducted on the field of child development have shown that parenting style has a hugh impact on the holistic development of a child and it affects their academic performance. In early 1960's famous psychologist Diana Baumrind (1967) conducted a study on more than 100 pre school age children (43). Based on the findings, she suggested three types of parenting style

based on the levels of warmth and control used by the parents in disciplining their child. These are Authoritarian, Authoritative and Permissive Styles of parenting. Later Maccoby and Martin (1983) expanded this 3 parenting style model using a two dimensional framework. They expanded Baumrind's permissive parenting style into two different types: Permissive Parenting and Neglectful parenting. These four types of parenting styles are sometimes called the Baumrind parenting styles or Maccoby and Martin Parenting styles. In Mother Alfassa's writings also we find the educational principles on the various styles of parenting.

Authoritarian style of Parenting

In Authoritarian style of parenting the children are expected to follow strict rules, failing to which results in severe punishment. In Authoritarian style of parenting there is no space for interpersonal dialogue and the children are treated like a machine which follows rules without questioning. The children are expected to follow a certain set of standards and the parents demand complete obedience without providing them the care and support they need to grow, which resulted in their poor academic performance (Attawa and Bry 229). The children of authoritarian parents feel insecure due to which they have low self esteem and exhibit many behavioral problems and mental issues. According to Baumrind, these parents '*are obedience- and status- oriented, and expect their orders to be obeyed without explanation*'(93).

Mother Alfassa not only rejects this kind of parenting but also provides a solution to the problem. She asserts, '*Never be authoritarian, despotic, impatient or ill-tempered. When your child asks you a question, do not give him a stupid or silly answer under the pretext that he cannot understand you. You can always make yourself understood if you take enough trouble; and in spite of the popular saying that it is not always good to tell the truth, I affirm that it's always good to tell the truth, but that the art consists in telling it in such a way as to make it accessible to the mind of the hearer*' (9).

Authoritative Style of Parenting

Unlike authoritarian style of parenting, authoritative style is far more democratic in approach as the parents allow their children to express themselves. In Authoritative style, there lies a scope for interaction and the parents try to understand the needs of the children. When the child fails to



meet the expectations, the parents are more nurturing and forgiving than punishing. Baumrind suggests that these parents *'monitor and impart clear standards for their children's conduct. They are assertive, but not intrusive or restrictive. Their disciplinary methods are supportive, rather than punitive. They want their children to be assertive as well as socially responsible and self-regulated as well as cooperative'* (93). The children of authoritative parents are more happy and independent. They also achieve higher academic success. They develop good social skills and can interact with their peers effectively. As far as their mental health is concerned, they don't usually suffer from any kind of anxiety, depression and exhibit no violent tendencies.

On a similar note, Mother Alfassa too discussed the need and importance of interpersonal dialogue in the development of the child. She said, *'another pitfall to avoid: do not scold your child without good reason and only when it is quite indispensable. A child who is too often scolded gets hardened to rebuke and no longer attaches much importance to words or severity of tone... never to scold them for a fault which you yourself commit. Child are very keen and clear sighted observers; they soon find out your weaknesses and note them without pity'*(10).

Focusing on the importance of forgiveness, The Mother further says,

'When a child has done something wrong, see that he confesses it to you spontaneously and frankly; and when he has confessed, with kindness and affection make him understand what was wrong in his movement so that he will not repeat it, but never scold him, a fault confessed must always be forgiven'(10).

Permissive Style

Permissive Parents do not exercise their power to rule or control but they are strong in love and affection. Due to extreme love and affection towards their child they often provide them extreme levels of freedom. The excessive amount of freedom spoils the children and they take advantage of their parents to get away with all kinds of mischief. According to Baumrind, permissive parents *'are more responsible than they are demanding. They are non-traditional and lenient, do not require mature behavior, allow considerable self-regulation'*(94). The children of permissive parents lacks self-control and many a times behave in an egocentric manner. They find it difficult to interact socially with their peers.

Though Mother Alfassa does not advocate the exercise of fear and control upon the child but she advised the parents to take a balanced approach towards rectifying their child's mistakes. She says, *'Only a discerning affection that is firm yet gentle and an adequate practical knowledge will create the bonds of trust that are indispensable for you to be able to educate your child effectively'*(11).

Neglect Style/ Uninvolved Style

In this style of parenting the parents neither demand anything from the child nor response to any of their needs. Neglectful parenting is also called uninvolved, detached, dismissive or hands-off style of parenting. There is no scope for interpersonal communication and the parents often reject the needs of their children. Though they are unsupportive but they still provide the basic needs of food, shelter, cloth and education expenses. The neglecting behavior often creates an emotional gap between the parents and the children and it makes them feel unimportant and unworthy of love and affection. The Children of such parents are very impulsive. They lack emotional control. They also suffer from various mental issues and addiction problems.

Focusing on this type of parenting Mother Alfassa said there are a few parents *'who give little thought to the true education which should be imparted to children'*(10). According to her this type of parenting should not be encouraged as it is the parents who are the first teachers of the child. She asserts,

'You should not allow fear to come between you and your child; fear is a pernicious means of education; it invariably gives birth to deceit and lying...You have to fulfill the duty which you owe your child by the mere fact of having brought him into the world'(10).

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that the child-rearing practices are very essential in the current society. This is the time when we have to realize the fact that child-rearing is not merely the exercise of power and control over the child rather we have to understand the child, their needs and take steps accordingly. As Mother Alfassa has said, this is the right time to educate ourselves and carefully evaluate our activities before educating the child (9). Besides, in the modern times



when everyone is running towards achieving the materialistic goals of education, we as teachers and parents should focus on inculcating the true values of education which is not limited to acquiring knowledge but to use it for the benefit of the mankind.

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