Memory in Education.

CHAPTER X.

"Few therefore are left who have sufficient memory"
PLATO, PHAEDRUS.

One of the most conspicuous features in Indian education as it used to be, was the training of memory. For long after writing was introduced, religious literature, history and technical knowledge were handed on orally from one generation to the next. Education, as in ancient Greece, was by means of oral instruction, and the learning by heart of classic literature. The learned man did not rely upon his library, but upon his memory alone. The memory thus trained and relied upon was capable of marvellous feats; even now there are men who know by heart hundreds and thousands of verses of Sanskrit literature which they have learnt once for all and can never forget. So too the singer of hymns or player of instruments used no written music, but relied altogether on memory; in the dark, or on a journey, it was all the same, what he knew was always at his command. Learning of this kind is growing rare; in India it has been generally superseded by the State systems of primary education,

Socrates, in the Phaedrus, is made to relate the story of an Egyptian named Theuth, who invented numbers and arithmetic, geometry and astronomy, draughts and dice, and above all, letters. At that time Thamus was king of all Egypt. "To him Theuth went and shewed him his arts, and told him that they ought to be distributed amongst the rest of the Egyptians. Thamus asked him what was the use of each, and as he explained it, according as he appeared to say well or ill, he either praised or blamed him. Now Thamus is reported to have said many things to Theuth respecting each art, both for and against it, which it would be tedious to relate. But when they came to the letters, " This knowledge, O king, " said Theuth, " will make the Egyptians wiser, and better able to remember; for it has been invented as a medicine for memory and wisdom." But the king replied, " O most ingenious Theuth, one person is able to give birth to art, another to judge of what amount of detriment or advantage it will be to those who are to use it, and now you, as being the father of letters, out of fondness have attributed to them the contrary effect to that which they will have. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn it through the neglect of memory, for that, through trusting to writing, they will remember outwardly by means of foreign marks, and not inwardly by means of their own faculties. So that you have not discovered a medicine for memory, but for recollection. And you are providing for your disciples the appearance and not the reality of wisdom."

The distinction between wisdom and knowledge must never be forgotten. It is wisdom which is the true end of education; in comparison with it, knowledge is a small thing. It is not a question of a useful as against a "fancy " education. It is one of point of view. Culture in the East has been only secondarily connected with books and writing; it has been a part of life itself. Knox tells us, in a passage which I have already quoted, of 17th century Ceylon, that the " ordinary Plow¬men and Husbandmen do speak elegantly, and are full of compliment. And there is no difference between the ability and speech of a Countryman and a Courtier. "The Sinhalese proverb, " Take a ploughman from the plough and wash off

his dirt and he is fit to rule a kingdom," was spoken, he says " of the people of Cande Uda. . . because of the civility, understanding and gravity of the poorest among them."

How could this have been? It is explained by the existence of a national culture, not dependent altogether on a knowledge of reading and writing. I still take Ceylon as the special case. Think of a party of women spinning in a Sinhalese village, ten or twenty illiterate and superstitious countrywomen working at a common daily task; but they sang meanwhile, principally Vessantara and Vidhura Jatakas, the story of Yasodhara, or the struggle of Buddha with the powers of evil. The field labourer still sings of the exploits of Gaja Bahu; or as he reaped the golden rice, the praise of some splendid *tala* palm; or a semi-religious song by moonlight on the threshing floor. Women still sing the story of Padmavati as they weed in the fields. It is, thus, in the existence a common culture independent of the writtten word that we must seek the explanation of the classical character of even the colloquial language at the present day, which is emphasised by Prof Geiger in his " Lttteratur und Sprache der Singhalesen'" (1901, p. 6.) where he prints side by side extracts from the *Ummagga Jataka* in high and colloquial Sinhalese. So elegant indeed is some of the up-country Sinhalese still that English-educated Sinhalese from Colombo are unable to respond in language of the same quality. This is natural enough, as Sinhalese and Tamil are usually not taught in the' English schools at all, orally or otherwise.

It has not always been the case even in the West that education and culture were so much matters of book-learning only.

“Irish poetry" says Mr. Yeats, "and Irish stories were made to be spoken or sung, while English literature, alone of all great literatures, because the newest of them all, has all but completely shaped itself in the printing press. In Ireland to-day the old world that sang and listened is, it may be for the last time in Europe, face to face with the world that reads and writes and their antagonism is always present under some name or other in Irish imagination and intellect. I myself cannot be convinced that the printing press will be always victor; for change is inconceivably swift, and when it begins— well as the proverb has it, everything comes in at the hole. The world soon tires of its toys, and our exaggerated love of print and paper seems to me to come out of passing conditions and to be no more a part of the final constitution of things than the craving of a woman in child-bed for green apples.

“The old culture came to a man at his work; it was not at the expense of life, but an exaltation of life itself. It came in at the eyes as some civic ceremony sailed along the streets, or as one arrayed oneself before the looking-glass, or it came in at the ears in a song as one bent over the plough or the anvil, or at that great table where rich and poor sat down together and heard the minstrel bidding them pass around the wine-cup and say a prayer for Gawain dead. Certainly it came without price ; it did not take one from one's friends and one's handiwork ; but it was like a good woman who gives all for love and is never jealous and is ready to do all the talking when we are tired.

" How the old is to come again, how the other side of the penny is to come up, how the spit is to turn the other side of the meat to the fire, I do not know, but that the time will come I am certain ; when one kind of desire has been satisfied for along time it becomes sleepy, and other kinds, long quiet, after making a noise, begin to order life."

In Ceylon the old culture has not entirely died out, especially in the up-country villages; it is however passing away, and in the most “civilized “districts is a thing of the past. This is partly due to the competition of Government and Mission schools, partly to the decay of Buddhism, partly to the general indifference to the importance of vernacular education. So much is the mother-tongue neglected and despised that instances of "educated" Sinhalese unable to speak to, or read a letter from, their own relations are by no means unknown ; those who have been through the mill in an ordinary English school are usually very ignorant of the geography, history and literature of Ceylon. Most stupid of all is the affectation of admiring everything English and despising everything Sinhalese or Tamil; recalling that time in England when " Falsehood in a Ciceronian dialect had no opposers, 'Truth' in patois no listeners."

The old system had, no doubt, its faults ; but it did not divorce the "educated" from their past, nor raise an intellectual barrier between the upper classes and the lower. The memory system itself has many merits. It may be doubted whether the examination system, with its tendency to superficiality and cramming, is any great improvement. The most obvious fault of the Eastern memory system is the lack of provision for the development of the reasoning faculties and too great a reliance upon authority and precedent. But the examination system at present in vogue is also a memory system, and as such is inferior to the old, in as much as information is merely got up for the immediate purpose and afterwards forgotten; this essentially temporary storage of facts has un doubtedly a weakening effect on mind and memory , the old-fashioned student at any rate remembered what he so laboriously learnt by heart; : and this thorough knowledge of a considerable amount of real literature was in itself of no small value, through it he attained to what we call " culture. " As Professor Macdonell has lately pointed out, " The redeeming feature of the native system, single-minded devotion to the subject for its own sake, is replaced by feverish eagerness for the attainment of a degree, through examinations which must be passed by hook or by crook." The examinations are not even good of their kind, for they make no provision for the history or languages of Ceylon, with the inevitable result that these subjects are neglected in schools. Under the old regime,' even those unable to read and write were often familiar with a great deal of legendary verse and ancient literature, and this general acquaintance with national literature produces a seriousness and dignity of speech foreign to the present-day youth. The grave Kandyan villager, ignorant of English and of the great world of business, was not lacking in courtesy and real culture.

Even the method of noisy repetition in the village schools (which indeed still characterises them) was not an unmixed evil. Scholars repeated their lessons “with a certain continu'd tone which hath the force of making deep impression on the memory" (P. della Valle, describing school in the Deccan, 1623, quoted by W. Crooke). Sir Richard Burton says of such schools that their chief merit lies in the noise of repetition aloud which teaches the boy to concentrate his attention. The "viva voce process is a far better mnemonic than silent teaching."

It is mainly however of older scholars that I speak, and of what they carry away from their education. An ordinary ‘English’ education may leave one with little capacity for self-entertainment, and does not give repose and dignity such as belonged to the old cultures of the East. Examinations do not do away with the necessity for learning by rote; they only make that learning of a temporary character. Does not every examinee know the relief with which, the pass list issued, lie relaxes the effort to retain

a mass of knowledge which he acquired only for the special purpose of that examination? I, for one, know it. One learns far too many subjects. I think no subject should be taken up which cannot be carried to some adequate length, no language studied by pupils who may not reasonably be expected to progress so far as to read the literature of that language with pleasure. It is extraordinary how easily what one learns for a purpose and not for its own sake is forgotten. I once passed the London Intermediate Arts examination in the various subjects, including Greek. In that Greek I took no real interest, and in less than a year after I could hardly spell out a few words, much less translate them. It was never supposed that I should become a Greek student; the Greek was part of a general education! But it did not teach me anything of the real Greece itself, its philosophy or art or literature. I came to read those later in translations, when the love of sagas led me to read Homer, and Indian philosophy led me to appreciate Plato, and Indian art led me to study Greek art too; and thus only did Greek culture come to mean anything to me. I studied Chaucer too; but not for years after did I know that Chaucer was pronounced differently from modern English and was beautiful poetry. There is thus something lifeless about English education by examinations even in England; a tendency to study many subjects with-out reaching culture by means of any.

What this education becomes when imposed upon the East may be imagined. It was no doubt much easier to take the cut and dried curriculum, say of the Cambridge Locals, and apply it to Ceylon, than it would have been to study the local conditions, and make provision for education in the mother-tongues of the people, or the study of their literature. It would have been a laborious and difficult task (but how fascinating to one whose heart was in the work!) to examine Indian educational ideals, and embody them with the new ideas into a live scheme of education which should develop the people's intelligence through the medium of their own national culture. It would be a great undertaking now even to organize a University in Colombo, adapted to the needs of the Ceylonese. It is infinitely easier to provide a scholarship in London. That may readily be granted; only those who shirk this labour and do not recognize their responsibility to the past, must not expect great credit for their labours in the cause of education. If Western education is to destroy, not to fulfil the ideals of the past, those who impose it cannot expect thoughtful men to welcome it.

I cannot think that European teachers and educationalists quite realise how far "English" education as it is given in the East is crushing all originality and imagination in the unfortunate individuals who pass through the mill. Yet the “Babu " and the "failed B. A." upon whom the Englishman looks down so contemptuously are the fruit of his own handiwork, the inevitable result of the methods of education which he himself has introduced. Broadly speaking, you take a people, and educate its children in foreign subjects, and do so in a foreign language, almost completely ignoring their own culture—and then are surprised at their stupidity ! Suppose that England was governed by Chinamen, and a premium set on Chinese culture; English children taught Chinese subjects in the Chinese language, and left to pick up the English language and English traditions anyhow at home— would there not be some “failed mandarins? "

The question is really one of the evasion of responsibility. If Empire carries with it duties and responsibilities, as we are told by its apologists, a part of that responsibility is towards the already existing culture and ideals of the subject peoples. These ideals may be different from those of the

rulers ; upon these then is laid the hard task of conquering not only the subject race, but their own selves and their own prejudices. Men have no right to be intolerant of the ideals of others. And only those teachers can truly serve the East and especially India, who, “in a spirit of entire respect for her existing conventions and for her past, recognize that they are but offering new modes of expression to qualities already developed and expressed in other ways under the old training."

Even science is not everything; it is as easy to fetter the imagination with the bare facts of science, taught as knowledge, and not as wisdom, as to fetter it in any other way. Science is a poor thing without philosophy; and philosophy was a part of the old culture. The Buddhist books speak of the “three worlds," the world of desire (kama loka), the world of form (rupa loka), and the form-less (arupa loka); to Buddhists these profound ideas are quite familiar. Of the idealism of the Upanishads, which permeates all Indian life and thought, Professor Deussen says that therein lie the roots "of all religion and philosophy: " We do not know what revelations and discoveries are in store for the restlessly enquiring human spirit; but one thing we may assert with confidence,—whatever new and unwonted paths the philosophy of the future may strike out, this principle will remain permanently unshaken." The idealism of the Upanishads—which, is continually re-expressed in all Indian, including Buddhist, literature—is in marvellous agreement with the philosophies of Parmenides and Plato, and of Kant and Schopenhauer. And all this is an inseparable part of Indian culture as it was. The far-reaching character of these basic ideals of Indian culture have expressed themselves in an infinite variety of ways ; but they are always there. Is not this culture worth saving? An English writer on Indian administration remarks on the absurdity of the idea that " teaching Indian schoolboys a smattering of modern experimental science will be a revelation to a culture and a civilisation which constructed a theory of the Universe, based on what we call modern scientific principles, five thousand years ago."

It will be said that all this lies beyond the simple education required by many Indians, who have their work to do in the world, and have little need for philosophy. But the genius of the old culture was seen in this very thing, that all partook of it in their own measure; culture came to a man at his work, it was an exaltation of life, not some-thing won in moments stolen from life itself. And one way in which this came "bout, perhaps the best and most universal way was through the literature; and that literature was mainly orally transmitted, that is, it was very much alive; it belonged both to the illiterate and to the literate; it expressed the deepest truths in allegorical forms which, like the parables of Christ, have both their own obvious and their deeper meaning, and the deeper meaning continually expressed itself in the more obvious, and both were beautiful and helpful. The literature was the intellectual food of all the people, because it was really a part of them, a great idealisation of their life; and what is most important of all, it was such as to be of value to all men ; large and deep enough for the philosopher, and simple enough to guide and delight the least intellectual. So that all, however varied their individual attainments, were united in one culture, the existence of which depended largely on the existence of a living literature, forming an inseparable back-ground to daily life, known that is by heart. Just as the Icelandic family histories were the stories of lives lived in the light of the heroic stories of the North, so Indian life is lived in the light of the tales of India's saints and heroes.

The two great Indian epics have been the great medium of Indian education, the most evident vehicle of the transmission of the national culture from each generation to the next. The national heroic literature

is always and everywhere the true basis of a real education in the formation of character. Amongst the Buddhists in Ceylon, the place of the epics has been taken by the stories of the life of Buddha and the legends that have clustered round his name. The value of the epics in education is partly in this, that they are for all alike, the literate and the illiterate, men, women or children ; all are united in a common culture, however varying the extent of their knowledge. It is this common culture which the modern English education ignores and destroys. The memorising of great national literature was the vehicle of this culture; and hence the tremendous importance of memory in education. For great literature of this kind, does not yield its message to the casual or unsympathetic reader at once, it must be part of the life of men, as the Greeks made Homer a part of their life, or the Puritans the Bible. It is no use to prescribe some

one or two books of the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, or a Jataka for an examination course. No, the great stories in their completeness must be a means of the development of the imagination—a faculty generally ignored and sometimes deliberately crushed by present-day educators. The great heroic figures must express to us still the deepest, most religious things. For all purity is included in the purity of Sita, all service in the devotion of Hanuman, all knighthood in the chivalry of Bhishma. "Such are some of the characters who form the ideal world of the Hindu home. Absorbed in her 'worship of the feet of the Lord,' the little girl sits for hours in her corner, praying, 'Make me a wife like Sita! Give me a husband like Rama!' Each act or speech of the untrained boy rushing in from school, may remind someone, half-laughing, half-admiring, of Yudhistira or Lakshman, of Kama or Arjuna, and the name is sure to be recalled. It is expected that each member of the family shall have his favourite hero, who will be to him a sort of patron saint, and may appear as the centre of the story if he is bidden to recount it. Thus, when one tells the Ramayana, Ravana is the hero; another makes it Hanuman; only the books keep it always Sita and Rama. And it is well understood that the chosen ideal exercises a preponderant influence over one's own development. None could love Lakshman without growing more full of gentle courtesy and tender consideration for the needs of others; he who cares for Hanuman cannot fail to become more capable of supreme devotion and ready service. And justice itself must reign in the heart that adores Yudhistira."

Very great too has been the part which the *Puranas* have played in moulding Indian character. I have often thought that not all the efforts of a hundred Moral Instruction Leagues and Moral Education Leagues can do for England what the Epics and the Puranas have done for India. The foundation of all true education lies in the national heroic literature. Poor, indeed, is the nation lacking such a means of education; and mistaken an educator who should dream of deliberately ignoring such a means of education laid ready to his hand in India!

Not less related to the fundamental realities of life is the epic literature of Buddhism, with which the people; literate or not, were familiar. For the cycle of Buddhist literature may fairly be called epic, with Buddha as its hero. Is not all sacrifice summed up in his renunciation of the attainment of Nirvana, when as the Brahman Sumedha the Bodhisat preferred to pass on through yet more existences towards the attainment of saving knowledge for the sake of creatures? What can be more beautiful than the story of his temptation by Mara, beneath the bo-tree, deserted by even the devas, save only Mahikantava, Mother Earth herself? Or the way in which, when four bowls were offered to him by the Four Regents,

he accepted all, making them into one, that he might not refuse the offering of any? For the Sinhalese Buddhist again, it is in the Jatakas and in the rest of the Buddhist classical literature that Indian culture and civilization are presented; the stories are of Benares and of the life of India long ago. The Vessantara Jataka is a perpetual delight to the simple country people; they see it all before them, just as it is painted on the vihara wall; do not they think of that sojourn in the forest, when they too go to make their pilgrimage to Samanala ? Into their very mats are woven symbols of the pansala at Vangagiriya where Vessantara and Madri Devi dwelt! Many of the Jatakas are perfect stories. There is the Chhadanta, telling of the elephant that yielded up its tusks to the hunter, and of the queen that died of shame and grief when she saw herevil wishes thus fulfilled ; there are beautiful tales like the Sasa and Bhadda Sula Jatakas, and amusing ones like the tales of the pandits in the Ummagga and Vidhura-pandita Jatakas. Is it not worth while to teach these to young people of every generation? Are they not good literature to be in the minds of the old folk?

But it is not only from the point of view of the thing remembered that memory is important in education. Memory, in the Indian view, is itself a most important part of personal character, associated especially with the ideas of self-control and mental concentration. “From wrath is confusion born; from confusion wandering of memory; from breaking of memory wreck of understanding; from wreck of understanding a man is lost." (Bhagavad Gita). The memory stands for a man's grip upon himself; its loss is characteristic of a disintegration of personality.

I pass then to the kindred subject of concentration. Psychology is, for India, the synthesis of all the sciences. As by clay everything made of clay is known, so all knowledge is founded on a knowledge of the self. How is this self to be controlled and focussed? Only by the power of concentration, the capacity for fixing the attention of the whole mind for more than a brief moment upon a single aim or thought. Try to do this, try for example to think of a triangle, to see it in your mind's eye, and nothing else but it, for say two minutes; unless you have practised concentration of thought before, you will not be able to do it, other thoughts will slip into your consciousness before you know it, and you will find that your mind has wandered from its object. But in any case you will realise what it means to be able thus to concentrate the thoughts at will, to rule and not be ruled by them. Thoughts are not guests to come and go of themselves; they must be chosen and invited, or turned away at will.

I will give an instance or two of the way in which this concentration enters into the ideal of Hindu culture, and of the ways in which it is learnt. A typical story in the Mahabharata describes the shooting lesson of the young princes. A clay bird is the target. Each prince in turn is asked what he sees. One says "A bird;" another, "A branch with a bird upon it," and so on. At last Arjuna, the youngest, answers; " A bird's head, and in that head only the eye," "The moment " says a writer on Hindu life "of the telling of this story to an Indian child is tense with feeling. For it embodies the culminating ideal of the nation, inasmuch as concentration of mind stands among Hindus for the supreme expression of that greatness which we may recognize in honour or courage or any kind of heroism."

Here is an illustration of the way in which concentration is learnt by those brought up in the atmosphere of Hindu culture. A part of the sandhya or daily prayer of the Hindus consists in the mental repetition of certain prayers (mantras) a certain number of times, in many cases 108. This might easily become a

mind-deadening mechanical process; but this result is carefully guarded against, and it is instead good practice in concentration. For one thing, the counting is much insisted on ; for repetition without keeping count leads to mental vacuity. Let anyone, on the contrary, try to repeat any two lines of poetry exactly 108 times, and see whether it does not require mental concentration to do it without failure. With the sandhya prayers there are also associated physical practices, especially that of breathing, retaining and expelling the breath, while prayers are repeated a certain number of times; this cannot be done without intense attention.

Many of the prayers too are, it is to be noted, "affirmations" of a very positive and beneficial character, practically auto-hypnotic suggestions. It is not surprising that Sandow found his most receptive pupils in India; for they already understood the importance of throwing the whole mind into every effort, not taking it in slovenly fashion with the body alone. The sankalpa is a resolve to perform sandhya; a Hindu writer remarks that upon this strong determination of the mental effort depends the efficacy of the worship. If the mind is not put into the act, it is done mechanically and loses half its value. The same thing was insisted on by Sandow in his system of physical training.

A great and real responsibility rests upon those who control education in the East, to preserve in their systems the fundamental principles of memory-training and mental concentration which are the great excellence of the old culture. No doubt, as I said before, it will be a difficult and troublesome process to so combine and fuse the old ideals with the new as to preserve the best in each. It is much simpler to reject the whole past and replace it by methods already cut and dried and defined. Nevertheless unless the necessity for doing the reverse of this is recognized, the English educator must not expect that his work will be taken at his own valuation, but must look forward to a constant struggle with those who wish, and intend, to preserve whatever was best in the old culture, especially the old appreciation of the value of memory training (most of all in connection with the making of great national literature an organic part of the individual life), and of mental concentration. But as I have already indicated, the future lies not with the English educator in India, but with the Indian people and the National Movement. The responsibility of preserving and continuing the great ideals rests with these, and not with any foreign educator.