CHAPTER VI

RELEVANCE OF EXISTENTIALISTIC VIEW OF EDUCATION TO HUMAN EXISTENCE AND PROGRESS
Existentialism enquires into life’s difficulties, tensions and ambiguities. It enables man to understand how he can make his life more meaningful and live more purposefully in complex and rapidly changing conditions. The existentialist approach to life and education recognizes the individual’s inner sovereignty. For existentialism, being educated means you are able to choose and to make your life meaningful i.e. achieving the best form of existence. It means becoming authentic, spiritual, having a critical attitude, having a clear sense of personal identity and a developing empathetic awareness towards others. Such educated person is able to face the existential reality. According to existentialism persons educated through common schools are not truly educated, they cannot confront existential reality when it faces them. The result is they find the ways to escape from it that will lead them to drug addiction, depression and suicide. Suicide is sought by man when he feels life is not worth living. Depression and drug addiction is due to anxiety, despair and alienation. A man living meaningful and purposeful life is secure from these tragic situations.

For existentialists, human existence is meaningless. Sartre says in Being and Nothingness. “It is absurd that we are born, it is absurd that we die” (Sartre, 1969, p.547). We don't know where we come from, why we are here and where we are going.

But because life has no meaning we should not give up, instead we can take the absurdity as a challenge to create our own meanings. For existentialists the human
mission is to find out the meaning of meaninglessness- or at least give some meaning through our words and deeds to an inscrutable universe.

According to Sartre, when we are troubled by meaninglessness this condition can stimulate us to create our own meanings in the world and this can be done when we move from ‘bad-faith’ i.e. we stop trying to become identified with the roles assigned to us towards the fulfillment of whatever we choose.

Existential education aims at becoming authentic. When we become authentic we purify our hearts by willing one thing, we recreate ourselves by deciding and then consistently pursuing whatever we regard worthy of our deepest efforts. In being authentic we desire our own reasons for living. We embrace our life and make it in our own way. Our life is not dominated by others, but lived by our will and choices. All these conditions of authenticity will make life meaningful to us and we will be encouraged to live and enjoy life instead of ending it. Such happy life will take us to progress as we find it interesting and work wholeheartedly.

In Indian philosophy too authenticity is emphasized. It holds that the life is an opportunity to the authentic existence. Indians have been in constant search for significance and the meaning of life.

Existential education aims to become more and more like oneself within and through the world. This needs two-fold dealing-with; i) an inner dealing with oneself and ii) an outer dealing with the world. Education has been described by Kierkegaard as the course individual goes through in order to catch up with himself. Catching with oneself refers to searching back to how one was before culture began to influence one's life. When one sees oneself as what he was before culture began to influence him he then is able to examine culture critically and follow or refrain the essential or
fatal, fruitful or fruitless. When it is done the culture will be no more a dogma for one. One can enjoy and grow in this culture of which he has a clear understanding and which he has chosen himself. When he chooses the fruitful he gains from it and this leads him to progress.

The person who reaches more and more to himself/herself and is in a meaningful exchange with the world leads an existential life. Existential education primarily attends to the potential of the children and not to functionality. The person is to live as himself/herself as he/she deeply is.

Man can project himself and create meanings and fashion an essence of him in this world. Human is responsible for the nature or essence that he constructs and this responsibility along with its basis i.e. indefinite freedom is terrifying. As Sartre believes in order to release from the panic caused by freedom and responsibility human being deceives himself. For example he refuses his freedom and responsibility and attributes the way that he chooses for his life to the fate. Jaspers believed that the result of science is knowledge and result of philosophy is awareness. This awareness is a beginning for taking advantage of freedom, being oneself and becoming oneself. He adds that although humans are constantly in condition that are not selected by himself but he can accept them and select them in the way to construct himself and by doing this he can transcend them. In his belief becoming oneself and transcendence is possible in two states of ‘existential communication’ and experiencing ‘boundary situations’. Existentialism stresses being oneself so much that it has declared running from oneself as evil.

Another existentialistic aim of education is realization of inner truth. The education should make student realize his subjective consciousness- ‘consciousness
for his self’. Being self conscious he will recognize his ‘self’ and get an understanding of his ‘being’. For Buber, “real existence that is real man (human beings) in his relation to his being is comprehensible only in connection with the nature of the being to which he stands in relation” (Buber, 1947, p.121). “The relation of child to himself should be strengthened by education” (Singh and Nath, 2008, p.205). In effect the goal of existentialist teacher is to help student develop self knowledge. Furthermore “existentialist teachers allow time to be set aside for self reflection and privacy because they believe that the questions of human existence are better addressed in settings in which each student has opportunity to think quietly and in solitude” (Casas, 2011, p.43).

For Buber, knowledge of self should always be the first and foremost task of any person. For that reason children must be taught to explore their two autonomous instincts ‘the originator’ and ‘communion instinct’. The originator instinct helps them learn about themselves and the world, it also helps them learn to tell the good from evil and right from wrong. “The instinct communion makes the child conscious of ‘mutuality’ and sharing which prepares him or her for true dialogue with the Thou” (Kalman, 2000, p.140). “Existentialists believe that the students have the right to make choices, the right to change and the right to experience spontaneous self realization” (Casas, 2011, p.42).

Understanding self the deepest part of human existence has been a challenge since ancient times. “Atmanam vidhi (know thyself) stands as a goal since upanishadic period” (Marwaha, 2006, p.7). Self realization, the direct experience of one’s inner nature is the goal of all systems of Indian philosophy. It holds that every
human being has to look within to understand his own nature and figure out his way to self realization.

For Muslim philosopher Iqbal, understanding the nature of the self is essential for understanding the nature of society and the principles of its growth. Self, according to Iqbal is an active and creative force in which a person should strive towards the achievement of a rich personality as well as participate in the affairs of the vicegerent of God on earth. This is in accordance with the Quranic perception of man as an ascending spirit who is capable of changing the entire course of history.

Kierkegaard emphasized subjectification as the function of education. He held that one cannot live someone else’s truth about existence. What means real existence to me may not mean the same for other person. The idea of existence may differ and here comes the element of subjectivity. There is no objective truth about existence. Every man sees his existence from different perspective moreover the concept of achieving the highest form of existence differs and each individual shapes his existence in that direction. By inscribing subjective truth in his life the individual makes his existence meaningful.

In Islamic philosophy too we find the element of subjectivity as it holds that the sort of existence differs from thing to thing and some things have more being than others (Here existence of contingent being is referred, Islamic philosophy divides the being into two: the essential being i.e. God and other the contingent being - the rest existents).

Subjectivity is also reflected in Indian philosophy. Indian philosophy maintains that we are also guided by subjective choices which bring us to reality. Radhakrishnan argued that human is essentially subject, not object.
Sri Aurobindo believed that human existence is based on integral truth of existence. And this subjectivity with its inward turn towards the essential truth of the self and of things open the possibility of a true spirituality i.e. movement from subjective age to spiritual age.

For existentialists, being educated means becoming more spiritual. Existentialism since a long time included the realm of the transcendent and spirituality in addressing the emotional well being of the individual. Existential spirituality focusses on personal inward discoveries rather than speculations about supernatural entities.

Becoming spiritually educated one is able to draw oneself together and recognize the unity of one's spirituality that gives meanings to the presence that one has in these various life roles. Being aware of this spiritual core provides an understanding for an educated person as to how he/she is able to make experiences meaningful and is able to form judgement as to what is and is not to be valued. According to existentialism, truth and values of existence are to be sought exclusively within the experience of the individual in our self discovery and self creation of what we authentically are.

When we become spiritual or discover ourselves at a very deep level, we learn to bring our beings into ever more perfect adjustment with existential freedom. This existential freedom helps us to project our being and leads us to progress.

Upanishadic philosophy of education aimed at arousing the spiritual vision of human beings for living an active worldly life but all for attaining salvation (moksha). In Indian thought true self realization is associated with the attainment of spiritual rather than material ends.
According to Buber, the essence of education is the manifestation of fundamental I-Thou relation through the authentic communication between one human being with other. In educational framework, I-Thou relation is the teacher-student relation. In maintaining relation with teacher, the students also become capable of maintaining good relations with others. Besides teacher-student relationship, I-Thou relation can be relevant to parent-children relationship. It is evident that most of the children attempt suicide because of the pressure that parents impose on them for achieving the goals (e.g. pursuing a particular course) that are not chosen by children, but set by their parents, this should be avoided. Parents if consider their children as Thou, they will respect and value their children’s will and decision and will then let their children become what they wanted to become instead of imposing their will on them. When given this freedom of choice, children will progress immensely in their self chosen goal.

Besides the two relations stated above the implication of I-Thou relation to other relations in our daily life can make the life definitely worth living as every being is then valued, cared and be himself/herself.

Jaspers considered love as the driving force of genuine education. Love makes the relation between teacher and student a personal encounter. In the course of education the student develops the feeling of love and that embraces the love of things, of the world and of God. When we love our dear ones we feel happy, when we love our neighbours and colleagues, there is good adjustment and when we love God and feel near to him we feel having reached the highest form of existence. Frankl (1984) claims that love ultimately provides hope and meaning for human beings. It is a characteristic of spirituality which demonstrates that purpose and meaning can be
derived from concern and care for others. Buddhist education also aims at inculcating universal ideal of love in children.

Existentialism recognizes love, authenticity and free will as potential avenues toward transformation enabling people to live meaningful lives in the face of uncertainty and suffering. Everyone suffer losses (e.g. loved and near ones die, relationships end) and these losses cause anxiety because of human limitations and inevitable death.

Death holds an important place in existentialist themes. Existential education aims to prepare students to face tragic situations in life, the most important being death. Man should be aware of his death in every moment of life. This realization of death will help in enjoyment of each and every moment of his life due to the fact that he is prepared for death. If the self is prepared to view death as a condition of living that inspires further awareness and positively augments the beauty of life, then death is merely a tool, a value enhancing step in life’s journey.

Awareness of an end to our lives gives our lives meaning. It thrusts us to give the short time we have on this earth significance and purpose. Knowing this help us to appreciate our relationships, our careers and all the other good things in life better. Lastly everything that we love and cherish in life, everything for which we have tremendous passion is anchored only by the sobering awareness that we can lose it all very easily and quickly.

Besides when man thinks and cares about the issue that he is a passer and goes to death is also a ground for releasing from routine and being oneself and becoming oneself.
Existentialism believes that a good education is one that attempt to assist each of us in seeing ourselves with our fears, frustrations and hopes.

Existentialism is concerned primarily with such education which liberate man’s mind from his isolation and his insignificance, liberate his mind from the confusions that prevents him from seeing his situation and his powers. Only a liberal mind can lead man to progress as to confused mind even small problems appear great obstacles and he doesn’t dare to solve even these small problems because he feels incapable or powerless to solve them. Existentialists believe that a free person in body, mind and spirit is more capable to be productive.

For existentialists, freedom is the source of progress and responsibility maintains established progress. Existential education thus is a process of developing consciousness of freedom to choose and there responsibility of one’s choices. The existentialist educator assists the students to assume responsible selfhood and to grow up and face the world responsibly. Man can define himself in relation to his existence by the choices he makes. Taking personal responsibility for choices we make also leads to the formation of self. Because we stop blaming others. Hence the self learns to define itself based on its own sense of agency. It does not rely on others to tell us what to do. So we then make authentic and independent choices. If we do let others do it for us, we are not living existentially that is into our true self. Those who live a responsible and meaningful life will be able to die with satisfaction. Emphasizing importance of choice Buber said, “learning is the selection of effective world by a person”.

Islamic philosophy also considers man to be a responsible being. The holy Quran considers man to be a being of having the responsibility of self-making. He has been endowed with the power of exercising his will and choosing his way.

Existentialists hold that human aims and aspirations are repressed due to determinism. They regard it as an inveterate foe of human aims and aspirations. And thus they emphasize that education should develop individuality. When man takes himself as an individual seriously only then he can focus on his individual growth and thus progress.

Existentialism is the most thoroughgoing philosophy of individualism in present time. Be yourself at all costs! Is its first commandment. It defends the spontaneity of the individual menaced by the mass, the class and the state and seeks to safeguard his dignity, rights and initiatives against any oppressive authority, organized movement or established institution.

Islamic philosophy also emphasize individualism. For it, individual and existence (outside God) are one and the same. God’s bestowal of existence is rendering things individual. Thus existence is identical to individuality.

Indian philosophical system Samkhya also aims at creating discerning individuals capable of attaining the perfection that exists within them. Vaishesika also believe in individuality. The word Vishesha means particularity and emphasizes the significance of individuality. Vaishesika education aims to develop individuality or the individual potential of the child.

Jainism strongly upholds that the individualistic nature of soul and personal responsibility for one’s decisions, self-reliance and individual efforts alone are
responsible for one’s liberation. The existential crisis of human suffering is a crisis of purpose and meaning as individuals strive to make sense of traumatic life events.

Heidegger’s existential ontology advocates that human existence is not a small biological entity which operates of itself but a dynamical, future oriented process of activity. This future orientation characteristic of man’s existence can offer possibilities for man to progress.

To make individual’s life meaningful i.e. enabling him/her to live existentially is the basic purpose of existential education. Existential meaning plays a crucial role in moderating the effects of stress on physical health and psychological well being. The role of existential meaning at different stages of life and at points of transition between stages leads to optimal human development across life span. Existentialism through its themes explores how man can live existentially and existential education develops the skills required for existential life. The following points illustrate:

1) Man has to make conscious meaning of life’s experiences. Existential education make students realize his subjective consciousness, discover his self.

2) In playing his daily roles he should not be identified with them ignoring his real self. Existential education develops authenticity or capability of being oneself in students.

3) Man has to take the full responsibility for all the circumstances in his life by doing what he can to make his today better. Existential education develops sense of responsibility in children.
4) Man has to be aware of the choices he makes everyday and strive for making better choices accepting that he alone is the author of his destiny. Existential education aims to inculcate choice making power in students.

5) He has to remember who he is in relation to others and be authentic separate individuality. He differentiates himself from others and let them experience the uniqueness of who he is. Existential education aims to develop individuality and uniqueness in child.

6) He has to accept that the prospect of death is a concept that actually helps him live his life more fully. Existential education prepares students to face tragic situations (death being most important) of life.