

BASIC EDUCATION AND HUMAN SECURITY¹

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1. Human Security

Human security is not a new idea, but it has had a remarkable revival. It is invoked astonishingly often in recent discussions. As a new “buzz” expression, it is in some danger of being summoned too often and too loosely, as is the fate of many such newly favored terms, like “social exclusion” which (in Else Oyen’s unflattering portrayal) has been “picked up” by people who “are now running all over the place arranging seminars and conferences to find a researchable content in an umbrella concept for which there is limited theoretical underpinning.”² Since that restless fate would be worth escaping, we might as well get straight to the “theoretical underpinning” of the concept of human security.

In initiating the current discussion on “human security” in Japan and elsewhere, Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo described it as the key idea in “comprehensively seizing all of the menaces that threaten the survival, daily life, and dignity of human beings and to strengthening the efforts to confront these threats.”³ He saw this focus as reflecting the “belief that human beings should be able to lead lives of creativity, without having their survival threatened or their dignity impaired.” Thus seen, human security can be understood as the protection and preservation of human “survival” and “daily life” (presumably against premature death, avoidable ill-health, the massive handicap of illiteracy, etc.) and also the avoidance of various indignities that can shower injury, insult and contempt on our lives (related, for example, to destitution, penury, incarceration, exclusion, or - again - illiteracy or innumeracy).

Pursuing this line of analysis, it can be argued that the “underpinning” of the concept of human security must include at least the following distinct elements:

- (1) a clear focus on individual human lives (this would contrast, for example, with the aggregately technocratic notion of “national security” - the favored interpretation of “security” in the military context);
- (2) an appreciation of the role of society and of social arrangements in making human lives more secure in a constructive way (avoiding a socially detached view of individual human predicament

and redemption, emphasized in some - but not all- religious contexts);

(3) a reasoned concentration on the downside risks of human lives, rather than on the overall expansion of effective freedom in general (contrasting with the broader objective of the promotion of “human development”); and

(4) a chosen focus, again, on the “downside” in emphasizing the more elementary human rights (rather than the entire range of human rights).

Human security is important but not exclusively so. The idea of human security identifies one class of objectives among many others which too may have legitimate claim on our attention. There is a good deal of complementarity with other foundational notions that have found their place in global social dialogue: for example, “human development” (brilliantly championed by the late Mahbub ul Haq), or “human rights” (revived in a new conceptual setting that draws indirectly on the classic championing of the “rights of man” by Tom Paine, or the “vindication of the rights of women” by Mary Wollstonecraft more than two hundred years ago). Human security does relate to “human development” and “human rights,” and even to “national security” and to “individual dedication,” but it is not the same as any of them. It is as important to be clear about the distinctions involved as it is to see the interdependence and interlinkages of human security with other important concerns pursued in contemporary global discussion.

2. Basic Education: Human Development, Rights and Security

Contrasted with a GNP-centred understanding of the process of development, the concept of human development has drawn on the need to focus on enhancing human freedom and capability in general. Not surprisingly, it has given a central place to basic education as a critically important component of human development. The Human Development Index, which I was privileged to help construct for Mahbub ul Haq, gives a major place to literacy and schooling as being central to the expansion of human capability and as part and parcel of the aggregate indicators of human development.⁴

That recognition, powerfully established in global dialogue by Mahbub ul Haq and others, is something on which the understanding of the educational needs of human security must draw. Human security is integrally connected with securing human capability, and thus applies directly to the contribution of education in removing the “downside risks” among the general class of objectives included under the broad hat of human development. Human security stands, thus, on the shoulders of human development with a particular adaptation of its rich vision and

perspective, and this applies especially strongly to the critical role of elementary education.

A similar relation holds between seeing education as a human right and focusing particularly on the role of basic education in the security of human lives. In this context, it is particularly important to invoke the “dual” real between “rights” and “duties,” and specifically the intellectual discipline demanding that all articulation of rights must go, for conceptual completeness, with identification of corresponding duties (Rights and duties form a dually integrated structure.) These correlate duties may well take the form of general obligations of the society at large, rather than the strictly legal form of minutely specified duties of particular individuals or agencies.⁵ Focusing on human security does not involve any relaxation of the need for society to seize the obligations that correspond to human rights, but the focus again is on the avoidance of downside risks.

Not surprisingly, the responsibility to provide basic education to help satisfy the right to security (rather than keeping people exposed to illiteracy and innumeracy) has to be central to the understanding of the demands of human security. Social obligation must not, of course, be confused with the role of the state alone: the solicitation applies to all institutions and agencies that can help to promote human rights and reduce human insecurity. The agencies involved can be national and international, public and private, formalized and informal, and so on. What links them together is the common need to recognize the value of basic education and the normative change to cater to it. The demands are moral and social - not legal or bureaucratic.

If this is accepted, then it should be obvious that the vast literature on the role of education in human development and in promoting human rights is immediately relevant in understanding the educational demands of human security. The vision is extended but does not have to be initiated in an ideological vacuum. This, in general, is true of human security as an idea, and applies to many fields - not just to education. For example, the problems of “health security” discussed by Lincoln Chen and Helen Epstein (and also Sudhir Anand) can be integrated with demands for human rights to health care and medical attention, with interrelated obligations of governments, international institutions, drug companies, specialized NGOs, and ultimately also the community of doctors and other medical personnel.⁶ The furtherance of human security can be greatly helped by the promotion of public discussion on its importance and on its extensive demands. (This is particularly important for the agenda of the Commission for Human Security.)

3. How Does Basic Education Influence Human Security?

Basic schooling can be central to human security for several distinct reasons. First, as already discussed, illiteracy and innumeracy are forms of insecurity in themselves. So the first and most immediate contribution of successful primary education is a direct reduction of one form of deep rooted insecurity.

Second, basic education can be very important in helping people to get jobs and gainful employment. This connection, while always present, is particularly critical in a rapidly globalizing world in which quality control and production according to strict specification can be crucial. The host country of this conference, viz. India, has suffered greatly from the neglect of basic education, and the ability of the Indian masses to gain from the opportunities of global commerce has been severely restricted by educational backwardness. Whenever the educational opportunities have been good in India (like in high-level technical education and specialized skill formation), Indians - with the appropriate educational background - have been able to make superb use of the global facilities, but the need to extend that openness to basic education (and also to the spread the basic technical skills more widely) remains extremely strong.⁷

Third, when people are illiterate, their, ability to understand and invoke their legal rights can be very limited. This can, for, example, be a significant barrier to illiterate women to make use even of the rather limited rights that they do actually have.⁸ The legal rights of widows can also be frequently violated because of the high incidence of illiteracy in the population.⁹ Lack of schooling can directly lead to insecurities by distancing the deprived from the ways and means of countering that deprivation.

Fourth, illiteracy can also muffle the political voice of the underdog and thus contribute directly to their insecurity. The connection between voice and security can well be very powerful: the observed fact that famines do not occur in democracies is just one illustration of the effectiveness of political voice and participation. The enabling power of basic education in making people more effectively vocal has a significant protective role and is, thus, central to human security.

Fifth, empirical work in recent years has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights, and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions within and outside the family. Indeed, even the survival disadvantage of women compared with men in developing

countries seem to go down sharply - and may even get eliminated - as progress is made in these agency aspects.¹⁰ These different characteristics (such as, women's earning power, economic role outside the family, literacy and education, property rights, and so on) may at first sight appear to be rather diverse and disparate, but what they all have in common is their positive contribution in adding force to women's voice and agency - through independence and empowerment. The diverse variables identified in the literature, thus, have a unified empowering role.

This role has to be related to the acknowledgment that women's power - economic independence as well as social emancipation - can have far-reaching impacts on the forces and organizing principles that govern decisions within the family. There is considerable evidence, for example, that the fertility rates tend to go down sharply with greater empowerment of women. This is not surprising, since the lives that are most battered by the frequent bearing and rearing of children are those of young women, and anything that enhances their decisional power and increases the attention that their interests receive tend, in general, to prevent over-frequent child bearing. For example, in a comparative study of the different districts within India, it emerges that women's education and women's employment are the two most important influences in reducing fertility rates.¹¹

There is also much evidence that women's education and literacy tend to reduce the mortality rates of children. The influence works through many channels but perhaps most immediately, it works through the importance that mothers typically attach to the welfare of the children, and the opportunity they have, when their agency is respected and empowered, to influence family decisions in that direction. Similarly, women's empowerment appears to have a strong influence in reducing the much-observed gender-bias in survival (particularly against young girls).¹²

These connections between basic education of women and the power of women's agency are quite central to understanding the contribution of school education to human security in general. The removal of survival disadvantages of women (and of young girls in particular), the reduction of child mortality (irrespective of gender), and moderating influences on fertility rates are all among the basic issues involved in removing the "downside risks" that threaten life and dignity.

Finally, the human security perspective on basic education must also deal with the coverage of education and the curriculum. This has already figured indirectly in the discussion

about the role of technical skill in the globalizing world, but there are also other issues involved, since schooling can be deeply influential in the identity of a person and the way we see each other. Recently the perspective of “clash of civilizations” (promoted by a great many commentators, including intellectuals as well as political leaders) has gained much currency, and what is most immediately divisive in this outlook is not the idea of the inevitability of a clash (that too but it comes later), but the prior insistence on seeing human beings in terms of one dimension only. To see people in terms of this allegedly pre-eminent and all-engulfing classification is itself a contribution to political insecurity.

The issue has received attention, if only indirectly, in the context of the role of Madrasahs in the growth of fundamentalism in Pakistan, but there is a danger here in India as well, given the way cultural and educational narrowing is being advocated by some political groups. Indeed, there is an implicit alliance here between the advocates of the “uniqueness” of the West (and - indirectly - of its supremacy as a tolerant “civilization”), which is an integral part of the approach of “the clash of civilizations” and the anti-Western as well as anti-pluralist agenda of VHP and the Parivar. Huntington, who describes India as a “Hindu civilization” has to downplay the fact that India has more Muslims (about 125 million - more than the entire British and French populations put together) than any other country in the world with the exception of Indonesia and Pakistan, and that it is impossible to have an adequate understanding of Indian art, music, literature or society without bringing in intercommunity interactions. It also overlooks the secular conception that is meant to be a defining characteristic of Indian polity, and the not entirely irrelevant historical fact that it was a Muslim king - the Moghal emperor Akbar - who provided the most forceful and eloquent statement on the need for a secular state (Since Huntington sees liberal tolerance as a unique characteristic of “the West” and argues that “the West was West long before it was modern,” it perhaps worth recalling that when Akbar was making pronouncements on the need for religious tolerance at the end of the sixteenth century, Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake in Campo dei Fiori in Rome for heresy.) The civilizational classification is not only hopeless history, it can directly feed political instability - and flammability - in the world by reducing people into narrowly defined categories, confronting each other across one hard “civilizational” divide.

Even in Britain today the originally pluralist movements for a “multi-ethnic Britain” are moving increasingly towards faith-based Muslim, Sikh and Hindu schools (there are several already). The focus is meant to be on learning about “one’s own culture” and tends to reduce

severely the educational opportunities that could help informed choice on what to believe and how to live. The doors of choice are made much narrower for young Britons - mainly of subcontinental origin - on the misguided belief that family tradition makes individual choice unnecessary, thereby stifling what Akbar called “the path of reason.”¹³

These issues have a global relevance, since the cultivation of a monolithic identity has become such an all-absorbing exercise. Even Prime Minister Blair’s eloquent articulation of his liberal - and in many ways visionary - views took the form of presenting his own interpretation of “true Islam” (a subject on which Blair has evidently become something of an expert), but did not seem to acknowledge that being a Muslim is not necessarily an all-engulfing identity, and even true Muslims could differ from each other, on many important issues.¹⁴

The question of openness of curriculum and the reach of reason can be quite central to the role of education in promoting human security. If the schools fail to do that by “thrusting smallness” on young children, we not only reduce their basic human right to learn widely, but also make the world much more incendiary than it need be. The connections between basic education and human security include these issues as well.

¹ Prepared as a background paper for the workshop on “Basic Education and Human Security,” jointly organized by the Commission on Human Security, UNICEF, the Pratichi (India) Trust, and Harvard University, in Kolkata, 2-4 January 2002.

² Elase Oyen, “The Contradictory Concepts of Social Exclusion and Social Inclusion,” in C. Gore and J.B. Figueirdo, eds., *Social Exclusion and Anti-Poverty Policy* (Geneva; International Institute of Labour Studies, 1997), p. 63.

³ Obuchi Keizo, “Opening Remarks,” in *The Asian Crisis and Human Security* (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 1999), pp. 18-9.

⁴ See UNDP, *Human Development Report 1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). The arguments relate to issues discussed in *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1985). See also Sudhir Anand and Amartya Sen, “Concepts of Human Development and Poverty: A Multidimensional Perspective,” *Human Development Papers 1997* (New York: UNDP, 1997).

⁵ On this see *Human Development Report 2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and on related matters, my essay, “Consequential Evaluation and Practical Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 97 (2000). [[Refer also to Arjun Sengupta’s recent paper for the Human Rights Commission.]]

⁶ [[Reference to Lincoln Chen and Helen Epstein’s forthcoming essay in *The New York Review of Books*. Also to Sudhir Anand’s paper on this.]]

⁷ On this and related issues, see Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), and its sequel, *India: Development and Participation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

⁸ See, for example, Salma Sobhan, *Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Legal and International Affairs, 1978).

⁹ See Martha Alter Chen, *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, and Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); see also her edited book, *Widows in India* (Delhi: Sage, 1998).

¹⁰ There is a vast literature on this; my own attempts at analyzing and using the available evidence can be found in “Gender and Cooperative Conflicts,” in Irene Tinker, ed., *Persistent Inequalities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); “More than a Hundred Million Women are Missing,” *New York Review of Books*, Christmas number, December 20, 1990; “Missing Women,” *British Medical Journal*, 304 (March 1992).

¹¹ See Mamta Murthi, Anne-Catherine Guio, and Jean Drèze, “Mortality, Fertility, and Gender Bias in India,” *Population and Development Review*, 21 (December 1995), and [the follow-up

paper by Murthi and Drèze, Population and Development Review, 2000].

¹² See Murthi, Guio and Drèze (1995) and Murthi and Drèze (2000).

¹³ I have tried to discuss this issue in my Annual Lecture to the British Academy for 2000, “Other People,” to be published by the British Academy (shorter version published in The New Republic, December 18, 2000). See also my “Reach of Reason: East and West,” The New York Review of Books.

¹⁴ It is perhaps worth recollecting in this context that even though Akbar’s political secularism and religious heterodoxy had supporters as well as detractors among influential Muslim groups in India, yet when he died in 1605, the Islamic theologian Abdul Haq, who had been very critical of Akbar for many of his beliefs and pronouncements, had to conclude that despite his “innovations.” Akbar had remained a good Muslim. See Iqtidar Alam Khan, “Akbar’s Personality Traits and World Outlook: A Critical Reappraisal,” in Irfan Habib, ed., Akbar and His India (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 78. But Aurangzeb was a good Muslim too in a different way, and we really do not have to determine who among Akbar and Aurangzeb was “the true Muslim” and who was a mere imposter.