Mahatma Gandhi and His Idea of Basic Education: An Historical Appraisal

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Abstract

In spite of his other preoccupations-political, social, economic, and religious; Mahatma Gandhi’s interest in education had always been profound and abiding. Gandhiji’s philosophy of education was not the upshot of any study of modern or ancient educational movements in India or elsewhere. This educational theory is ‘original’, ‘new’ and ‘epoch making. It evolved out of his wide and long experiences of the political, social and economic life of his country. Therefore it was apposite for his motherland. Gandhi realized that at an early age education was therapy for all the ills and evils with which contemporary India had been afflicted. This paper aims to understand and review Gandhian principle of basic education though the writing of Gandhi himself. His several books on education help this essay to review and assess the significance of his ideas of basic education from a historical perspective, which not only changed the educational system of India, but ushered in a social revolution.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, Basic Education, Nail Talim, Handicrafts, Social Change.

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In spite of his other preoccupations-political, social, economic, and religious; Mahatma Gandhi’s interest in education had always been profound and abiding. Gandhi, the father of the nation gave the format of education for modern India which can be called the first blue print of the national system of education which is job centered, value based and mass oriented. It provided for manual work along with intellectual exercise at a central place in the curriculum at all stages. It is the first model of ‘Vocationalisation’ of Education in India.

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His Ideas on Education

Gandhiji emphasized another essential condition of the educational process, that it must be work centered. He elaborated his thoughts on education in Harijan dated 31st July, 1937. He wrote, “By education I meant an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man-body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is only one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated. Literacy in itself is no education. I would therefore begin the child’s education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training.

I hold that the highest development of the mind and the soul is possible under such a system of education. Only every handicraft has to be taught not merely mechanically as is done today but scientifically, i.e., the child should know the why and the wherefore of
every process. I am not writing this without some confidence, because it has the backing of experience. This method is being adopted more or less completely wherever spinning is being taught to workers.

I have myself taught sandal-making and even spinning on these lines with good results. This method does not exclude knowledge of history and geography. But I find that this is best taught by transmitting such general information by word of mouth. One imparts ten times as much in this manner as by reading and writing. The signs of the alphabet may be taught later when the pupil has learnt to distinguish wheat from chaff and when he has somewhat developed his or her tastes. This is a revolutionary proposal, but it saves immense labour and enables a student to acquire in one year what he may take much longer to learn.

This means all round economy. Of course, the pupil learns mathematics whilst he is learning his handicraft. Given the right kind of teachers, our children will be taught the dignity of labour and learn to regard it as an integral part and means of their intellectual growth and to realize that it is patriotic to pay for their training through their labour. The core of my suggestion is that handicrafts are to be taught, not merely for productive work, but for developing the intellect of the pupils. You have to train the boys in one occupation or another. Around this special occupation you will train up his mind, his body, his handwriting, his artistic sense and so on. He will be a master of the craft he learns...” [2].

For him mere literacy was not education, it was only one of the means of education. Bit one literate man necessarily must not be educated. Education means a lot, an all round development, where body, mind and inner self correlates with one another. Handicraft can draw out best of development of the mind and the soul from the child. Guided by his own experience Gandhi believed that handicrafts should be taught to the children scientifically i.e. the technical know hows has to be taught to the children.

By this the children could get a practical knowledge of every craft which would automatically teach them every possible subject in a joyful manner. Therefore the children would have an all-round development which was constrained in reading and learning process. If children were guided but proper teachers handicrafts can teach them dignity of labour, all the primary subjects, ability to write, intellectual development and love for indigenous craft and patriotism. This was the exact education system which was needed in the contemporary India.

As regards to primary education Gandhi believed that it should be at least of seven years with all the basic subjects with a vocation. He clearly rejected English in the primary classes. He unfolded himself in his ‘Basic National education’: “Primary Education, extending over a period of seven years or longer and covering all the subjects up to the matriculation standard, except English, plus a vocation used as the vehicle for drawing out the minds of boys and girls in all departments of knowledge, should take the place of what passes to-day under the name of primary, middle and high school education”[3].

The Stages of Nai Talim as Defined by Gandhi

The First Stage

Gandhi gave a revolutionary proposal in the programme of Nai Talim, he turned the conventional education system upside down with his course of education. This New Education has been described as “Education for Life”. Thus usually accepted educational procedure is that the educational process begins with the earliest years of childhood and in the case of the majority of children, ends with the primary stages. For a fortunate few, it extends through the secondary, high and university stages. In Nai Talim, however, the educational process is approached from a different perspective. It seems clear that if this New Education is to be effective, its foundation must go deeper; it must begin not with the children but with the parents and the community. The first stage in the educational programme is therefore adult education, that is the
education of the community as a whole and of every individual member, for a happy, healthy, clean and self-reliant life.

The Second Stage

The second stage is that of pre-basic education or the education of children under seven. As soon as the child is independent of mother and is able to walk to the school, the sphere of the educational process is extended from the home to the school. Pre-basic education, therefore in the fullest sense, is the education of children under seven for a development of all their faculties, conducted by the school teachers in co-operation with the parents and the community in schools, in the house and in the village. Nowadays play schools or pre-schools took the responsibility of this pre-basic education mostly.

The programme of pre-basic education includes physical nurture, medical care, personal and community cleanliness and health, self-helps, social training, creative activities (both in work and play), speech training, the development of the mathematical sense, nature study, art and music.

The Third Stage

The third stage is the eight years’ programme of basic education for boys and girls between the seventh and the fifteenth year. The objectives programme and detailed syllabuses recommended for this stage of education discussed in the later part of the essay.

The Fourth Stage

The fourth stage is that of post-basic education, which he experimented in Sevagram and Bihar. This is to be conceived as the educational nurture of adolescent youth from the fifteenth to the eighteenth years of life. While basic education may be described as planned as “education through self-sufficiency”. The educational community at this stage should be residential, possibly taking the form of a “school-village”, should provide opportunity for a great ranges of productive activities which will both support organized knowledge. The post-basic school should lead on naturally either to the responsibilities of adult family life in one or other of the normal productive occupations of humanity, or (in the case of those strong natural bent and aptitude) to some form of professional training in a University.

The Fifth Stage

The fifth or university stages of Nai Talim will demand much careful thought in the near futures in order that the principles of education for life and through life may permanent the work of the Universities and so that these may effectively serve the real needs of mankind, without losing say of the distinctive and valuable university tradition of sound and accurate scholarship or the zest for knowledge for its own sake. The chapter on Rural Universities in the University Commission Report referred to above is a stimulating contribution to practical thought on these lines.

The Objectives behind Nai Talim

The objectives of basic education can be summarized as a two-fold aim, each part of which is integrally bound up with the other.

All boys and girls in India should grow up as citizens of a new social order, based on co-operative work as envisaged by Nai Talim and with an understanding of their rights, responsibilities and obligations in such a society.

Every individual child should have full opportunity for the balanced and harmonious development of all his faculties and should acquire the capacity for self-reliance in every aspect of a clean, healthy and cultured life, together with an understanding of the social and moral implications of such a life.

A few brief comments on this statement of objectives may be of help to the teacher in maintaining the true atmosphere and healthy balance of activities in the daily work of the school [4]. Therefore the basic intentions were to brought a social change and to brought out all round development of the child.

The Programme of Work

The programme of work will be planned round the four or five activities which experience has shown to be of the most
fundamental importance for life and which offer the richest educational opportunity. These activities are:

- The practice of clean and healthy living.
- The practice of self-reliance.
- The practice of a productive basic craft.
- The practice of citizenship in a community.
- The practice of recreational and cultural activities.

Cleanliness and health have been given the first place in the syllabus, as our experience with village children and teachers during the past ten years has shown the primary importance of these problems in our national life. The general ignorance regarding rules of personal and community hygiene and health is so great in our country that it is only by making it the first subject in our programme that we can hope to bring about a change. It is also expected that the activities connected with individual and collective cleanliness and health will be the first educational programme in the school day. In the earlier grades the programme will consist mainly of practical activities with oral explanation and instruction wherever necessary. In the higher grades general science and mathematics, language and social studies may be taught in connection with the activities.

It will be helpful to indicate briefly the various types of knowledge, skill, attitude and habit which should be correlated with these five centres of activity in the programme of the basic school.

The Practice of Clean and Healthy Living

This will include the development necessary for individual health and cleanliness and community hygiene. It will include the practical skill to carry out all types of cleaning and sanitation work efficiently. It will involve physical education and the study of the elements of physiology, hygiene, sanitation and dietetics in a scientific manner.

The Practice of Self-reliance

This concept, as has been pointed out in the introduction, is of more far-reaching educational significance than that of economic self-support alone, but it must include economic self-support both for its own sake and as very valuable means of character training.

The practice of self-reliance therefore includes working for self-support in food, by vegetable growing, agriculture, the storing of food stuffs and the cooking of meals. The study of much general elementary science, such as botany, zoology, chemistry and physics, will be taken up naturally in connection with this work.

Self-support in clothing includes learning all the processes by which the cotton is grown and the cloth manufactured and sufficient skill in needlework and dress-making to make and repair simple garments for oneself and for younger children. It naturally involves much practice in arithmetical and some understanding of simple mathematical and physical concepts.

The practice of self-reliance should also include learning how to maintain buildings, tools and common household equipment of all kinds in good repair. This is closely connected with the practice of good citizenship in the home.

The Practice of a Productive Basic Craft

The following three crafts are recommended as those which have been proved by experience to be most suited for children of basic school age and most valuable for developing intelligence and general knowledge:

- Agriculture and gardening.
- Spinning and weaving.
- Wood and metal work.

The basic craft will be learned stage by stage up to a considerably higher level of efficiency than is involved in the concept of all round self-reliance described in the previous section. It will also be the chief centre of correlation for the “tool subjects” of language and mathematics and for the study of general science and will also involve a considerable amount of social studies. It should be clear at the same time that every
centre of activity can make its contribution to the mastery of the tool subjects, just as every centre of activity can contribute to the development of a strong and healthy physique.

The Practice of Citizenships in a Community

This will include, on the practical side, the development of habits and attitudes of cooperation and neighbour lines at home, at school, in the village or local community and in relation to the State and to humanity as a whole. On the theoretical side it will involve a study of history, geography, civics and of sociology and economics in an elementary form related to the conditions and needs of the locality.

The Practice of Recreatinal and Cultural Activities

These activities can be of wide range and great variety. Games and dancing, music and drama, the celebration of festivals of social, religious, historical and national significance, will all be included. They will involved the study of good literature in the mother tongue, an introduction to the national language and training in the appreciation of good art and music. The aesthetic side of the children’s nature will be developed largely through these activities.

The Standard of Attainment

We have now to consider in outline what we may expect the ordinary child in the schools to achieve in the course of eight years’ training.

When Gandhiji first placed the scheme of National Education before the All India National Education Conference in 1937, he described the standard of attainment to be aimed at, in the following words:

“The course of primary education should be extended at least to seven years and should include the general knowledge gained up to the matriculation standard less English and plus a substantial vocation.”

This statement was made before the principles of basic education were actually put into practice and we had no experience behind us to state the standard in terms of the new educational objectives and practice. It was therefore necessary to use the existing educational terminology and this led to some confusion and misunderstanding. The workers in basic education are, therefore, often asked whether the pupils who have completed the basic course have attained, in particular subjects such as history, geography, mathematics, algebra, etc., the standard prescribed in the matriculation syllabus.

It is possible now, after nearly twelve years of practical (page-24) work, to indicate the standard aimed at in terms of the New Education. We must remember however, that we are only in the beginning of the experiment and can only indicate the standard in outline. As the work goes forward and we gain deeper insight into and practical working knowledge of this New Education, we shall be able to state this standard more clearly and in greater detail.

The standard of attainment to be expected at the end of the course can best be stated under seven major heads, as follows:

- The capacity for clean and healthy living.

The will include:

- A harmoniously developed body, healthy and agile capable of doing hard physical work.
- Right and regular habits of health and cleanliness, a high standard of personal hygiene and an understanding of its social and moral aspects.
- A properly developed sense of community cleanliness and aknowledge of the fundamental principles of village sanitation.
- The capacity, to organize programmes of cleanliness for house, school and local community.

Elementary knowledge of the organs and functions of the human body, the fundamental rules of health and the principles of a balanced diet (carried out with locality available foodstuffs).
A knowledge of simple first aid, common local medicinal herbs and the cause and prevention, treatment and nursing of common ailments.

- The capacity for self-reliance in food, clothing and the repair and maintenance of ordinary buildings and tools. This will include:
  - The ability to produce cloth from raw cotton.
  - The ability to grow sufficient food for one’s own consumption.
  - The ability to cook a simple meal.
  - Knowledge of the principles and processes connected with the storing, cooking and serving of food for a family or a community, including budgeting and maintenance of kitchen accounts.
  - Knowledge of the use and care of common household tools.
  - The ability to ride a bicycle and to keep it in good order including simple running repairs.

- The capacity for self-sufficiency through a selected basic craft.

  - This will involve the attainment of knowledge and skill sufficient to enable the pupil if necessary to earn his own living (i.e. balanced diet, simple clothing and other minimum needs) through the practice of the craft.

- Acquaintance with the fundamental scientific, mathematical and mechanical principles as they are exemplified in the phenomena of nature and the activities of ordinary life.

This will include:

  - An elementary knowledge of mechanical and mathematical principles involved in the use of tools and equipment connected with the basic and other crafts.
  - An acquaintance with the physical, chemical and biological principles involved in growing food and cotton, in cooking and other household arts, in the processes of the basic craft and in the maintenance of health and the provision for proper sanitation.

- Capacity for the Responsibility of Citizenship.

This will include:

  - An understanding of the ideology of a co-operative social order and ability to work co-operatively with other people.
  - An understanding of the benefits of a decentralized economy based on regional self-sufficiency and the practice of cottage industries and of the nature of a healthy relationship between village and town.
  - An elementary knowledge of the place and value of cooperative societies and the principals involved in their organization.
  - An elementary knowledge of the economic, social and political problems of India and the world as gained through the intelligent study of newspapers and magazines.
  - An elementary knowledge of the geography and history of India and the world, especially in so far as it is necessary to the understanding of present conditions. This should include knowledge of the founders and teachings of the great world religious and the religious, social and historical significance of the fairs and festivals locally celebrated.

- Sufficient mastery over tool subjects such as language and mathematics to enable the pupils to carry on their daily activities efficiently and to further their knowledge after the completion of the basic course.

This will involve, in languages:

  - The ability to speak clearly and with reasonable fluency in public and school assemblies on subjects of practical importance in the school or village community.
  - The ability to express ideas clearly and accurately in writing and to draw up a well planned report.
The ability to speak, read and write simple Hindi, when this is not the mother tongue.

- In arithmetic, accuracy and reasonable speed should be attained in the following processes related to the needs of actual life:
  
  The significance of numbers.

- The four fundamental operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) applied to common weights and measures, money, time and distance.
- Practical mensuration.
- Elementary account keeping.
- Use of the unitary method, the rule of three, ratio and proportion, problems in speed and work.

- The capacity to appreciate true art, form good taste, entertain the community and use leisure time with profit and pleasure.

This will include:

- An acquaintance with good literature in the mother tongue.
- An acquaintance with some good examples of pictorial and plastic art and experience of self-expression through drawing, painting, clay modeling etc.

- A knowledge of some good music, classical and traditional and ability to sing devotional and national songs in chorus.
- An acquaintance with the traditional decorative arts of the locality and the power to discriminate between good and bad taste in the adornment of the person and the home.
- Some experience in helping to organize dramas festivals and other cultural activities for activities for the school and the local community.

Note: In the detailed syllabus which follows, the division of work grade-wise is suggested not obligatory. The syllabus to an elastic one. It indicates the amount and kind of knowledge that should be acquired by the end of the eight years course and the subject-matter has been arranged in an order roughly corresponding to the increasing maturity of the children. In cases where the average of a class is much higher or lower than that indicated here, parts of the syllabus may have to be modified accordingly. Other modifications will no doubt be made to suit actual circumstance. Throughout it is expected that in the course of daily school life there will be frequent reference back to material dealt with in an earlier grade, so that a practical knowledge of the skills and subjects taught, once acquired will not be lost [6].

Thus we see that Gandhi’s conception of education is indigenous and based upon the social conditions and future needs of the country. The main function of education is to fit the individual to play his role in the society in a worthy manner [7].

**Significance of Basic Education**

Gandhi thus had a dream of achieving a silent social revolution through his education programme. He wrote, “My plan to impart primary education through the medium of village handicrafts like spinning and carding etc., is thus conceived as the spearhead of a silent social revolution fraught with the most far-reaching consequences [8]. The object of his education was to transform the village children into modern villagers [9]. It was meant to uphold non-violence and was to be of a non-exploitative character.

More importantly, the aim of Gandhian education was not merely to prepare the individual for employment but to make the individual self-sufficient. For Gandhi the goal of education was character building. He advocated that National Education had a great role to play in the formulation of self-rule. The future of the individual and the progress of the nation were thus wholly dependent upon education. Gandhi never lost sight of the manifold problems and challenges that confronted the nation. His prescription thus envisaged a meaningful, useful and relevant education that would cater to the needs of a post independent Indian society [10]. But Gandhi's vision of providing social justice through the adoption of a village based programme remained unrealized to a large extent as independent India opted to cast its lot with the Macaulayn paradigm [11].
The Third All-India Conference on Basic education held at Sevagram in January 1945 reviewed the working of Basic education in the light of the provincial reports presented on the occasion and was satisfied ‘that despite the adverse circumstances, Basic education had made a headway and its influence had been marked by the development of the child's personality. People had recognized its worth. The development of citizenship was so marked from the review of the reports that it was considered to be the strongest point in favour of the scheme and provision of it on a very large scale was contemplated [12].

In September 1945, while addressing the New Adult Education Committee Gandhi said, “Education for life does not mean education for the duration of life, but education for the sake of life .... Adult education is a matter of teaching the art of living. A man who masters the art of living has become a complete human being. Keep this vision before you; let this ideal of Nai Talim inspire your work [13].

This scheme of education was accepted as the basis of university and secondary education in the report of the University Commission (1949). In the chapter of the repeat dealing with Rural Universities it is described in the following words:

“The method outlined in its rudiments by Gandhiji is not just a way of meeting the educational needs of little children. He has stated the essential elements of a universal method of education, from the time a little child shares in its mother’s work. Through the whole process of growth of personality to the time when the nature man of disciplined mind and character works at the side of the master in the achievement of a great design. The essence of this philosophy is that education should combine practice in the everyday processes of living and working, with more formal training. This is a fundamental concept which is steadily gaining support and application in the educational world [14].”

In its appraisal of Basic education in 1956, the Assessment Committee had every justification for coming to the conclusion:

“There is unanimous testimony that Basic school children are more alert, more full of question and more eager to know, more resourceful, more responsible and more concerned with their surroundings. They also exhibit more powers of expression and more of the qualities of an integrated developing personality. Intellectually also they show more keenness to analyze, understand and piece together whatever knowledge is gained. All these are undoubtedly educational gains. But as we have stated, the whole of Basic education is yet only in the making and much more effort and care will have to go into the work before Basic educational schools can give us the real picture of their possibilities [15].

References


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