

‘Learning by Doing’: Understanding the Gandhian Approach to Education

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Mahatma Gandhi was a visionary who walked ahead of his times. His vision and dreams of an Indian society embodying the values of brotherhood and equality in the true sense were rooted on the twin pillars of satyagraha and ahimsa. His hopes were anchored on the youth of the country. Gandhi strongly believed that only education could liberate the youth from the vices of the Indian society and propel them towards progress, freedom and self-realisation. One of the key components of his Constructive Programme was education. Gandhi spent a lot of time deliberating on how to structure and realise it so that all Indians would benefit. This paper intends to explore the idea of education proposed by Gandhi and his compatriots, especially the concept of ‘learning by doing’. The paper would briefly assess the new National Education Policy in this light.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Nai Talim, Mahatma Gandhi, Education

India has a rich heritage of knowledge creation and dissemination, deeply rooted in a system of education which considered learning a revered and pious pursuit. The caste system marred it, denying educational opportunities to many communities. The setting up of schools by Christian missionaries may have democratised the educational sector, but one cannot ignore the deliberate intentions of the British Empire in encouraging it. Like many of the stalwarts of our national struggle, Mahatma Gandhi was educated in the system established by the British, in India and England. The more opportunities he got to interact with this system, the greater was his realisation that it had many inherent defects which were severely incapacitating the Indian society. He said, "the system divorced the child from his social surroundings, created new castes, laid emphasis on literary education, and there was a neglect of mass education" (Patel, 1953). From this understanding of the incompetence of the existing pedagogical structure, Gandhi evolved a theory of education intended to overcome the glaring discrepancies.

Education is the process of receiving systematic instruction, the basis for human capital, imperative for shaping a better society. Gandhi expressed unbridled faith in education as a superior alternative to remove the vices of modernity and all the injustices in Indian society. He envisaged education beyond literacy and numeracy. Gandhi firmly believed that only an inclusive and experiential educational system could help the young and the marginalised in freeing themselves to imbibe the true spirit of truth and non-violence. This paper proposes to look deep into the idea of education proposed by Mahatma Gandhi, often referred to as 'basic education'.

As we discuss the Gandhian philosophy of education, it is coincidental that the Government of India is proceeding towards adopting a new National Education Policy. The draft policy was released in 2019 and has been open for commentaries. It has been subjected to exhaustive yet inconclusive reviews on its implications on

the educational dynamics of the country and the development of youth. The policy proposes certain revolutionary makeovers in the entire academic environment, from pre-schooling to higher education. This paper will briefly undertake a comparison between the proposed NEP and Gandhian vision of education. The discussion assumes significance because, despite decades of efforts to spread education, problems like illiteracy and inefficiency continue to challenge the system. Poverty and family factors still cause young children to drop out of schools. The dropout rate is above 25 per cent in five states in the country (Express News Service, 2020). Insufficient infrastructural facilities and inefficient staff mar the productivity of the educational institutions. A study by a Parliamentary Panel on education reveals a significant gap in allocation and utilisation of budgetary funds, leaving nearly a third of schools lacking electricity, playgrounds, sanitation facilities and laboratories (The Hindu, 2020). The problems related to curriculum and teaching-learning outcomes have been pointed out as a grave concern by experts in the sector. The syllabus is unilateral in structure, limited to mere information dissemination and rote learning, and lacks the fostering of creative learning and thinking.

Despite reinforcing the right to education as a fundamental right through a constitutional amendment and act, the sector has not achieved the expected outcomes. At this juncture, the state looks forward to the new education policy to rewrite the fate of the educational sector. Simultaneously, there has been a revival of interest in closely understanding the Gandhian perspectives on education as an alternative directive to amend the system.

Gandhi's Philosophy of Education

Mahatma Gandhi dreamt of equality and justice for all. His life was an array of experiments to attain his dream. While in South Africa and India, Gandhi continually tried many ways to empower and enlighten the people. The ashram life, publications and speeches are proof of the relentless pursuit of his dreams. His vision is multifaceted, encompassing many dimensions of life. One can summarise all that in the Constructive Programme he proposed. It focussed on eighteen points: communal unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition, khadi, other village industries, village sanitation, basic education, adult education, the emancipation of women, education in health and hygiene, provincial languages, national languages, economic equality, peasants, labour, tribals, leprosy patients and students. Amongst these, Gandhi took keen interest and effort to expound the objectives and other peculiarities of his idea of 'basic education' (Gandhi, 1945).

He envisioned character building as the core purpose of education. Gandhi urged us to understand the literal meaning of 'shiksha', that is, 'training' that stimulates the intellectual, physical and spiritual faculties (Gandhi, 1907). His vision on education evolved from his dissatisfaction with the British education model and was strengthened through his educational experiments in his Ashrams in South Africa and India. Gandhi found the British education system very narrow and superficial in its purpose and outcomes, alien and inadequate in inculcating the values of humanity and morality in the child. Mere literacy was not sufficient for social transformation. British education based on English as the medium of instruction reinforced the domination of western culture, leading to passive slavery, which he feared was more perilous than poverty. He strongly felt that "the foreign medium has caused brain

fag, put an undue strain upon the nerves of our children, made them crammers and imitators, unfitted them for original work and thought, and disabled them from filtrating their learning to the family or the masses" (Gandhi, 1956).

Another observation was that the pedagogy that was limited to imparting tools to read, write and calculate killed initiative and cultivates poverty in mind. This compelled Gandhi to explore alternative educational patterns while setting up the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, and he continued the experiments while establishing Sabarmati Ashram and the Champaran Schools in India. Gandhi was convinced that proper education would lead to healthy, courageous lives. These ideas on education were followed in Shantiniketan and the Gujarat Vidyapith (Avinashilingam, 1960).

Experiments in Education at Tolstoy Farm

The educational pattern adopted in South Africa was initially intended to educate the children of the Satyagrahis who had been imprisoned. In 1910, it was at the Tolstoy Farm that Gandhi took up the task of starting a school. Along with literary training, he focused on moral and physical training. Exercises would stimulate the intellect. Children were encouraged to take up tasks like gardening, cooking etc. Soon, the youth's vocational training gained prominence, giving the necessity of being self-supporting (Avinashilingam, 1960).

Another interesting aspect of the system was that the teachers were expected to do all that they expected the pupils to do. Gandhi said, "on Tolstoy Farm we made it a rule that the youngsters should not be asked to do what the teacher did not do...hence whatever the youngsters learnt, they learnt cheerfully." He was convinced that "no permanent improvement in character can be effected except through example". The function of the teacher was not merely to stimulate intellectual faculties in the taught but also to inculcate high thoughts and ideals (Gandhi, 1956). At the Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi tried to impart spirit training to the children through hymns and stories. He gradually introduced his views on truth and non-violence to those children. These ideas were carried forward once he returned to India. In 1917, while leading the Champaran Satyagraha, Gandhi realised that ignorance was a dangerous problem in the villages of India. With the assistance of volunteers from Bombay, he decided to open schools in six villages for children under the age of 12 (Avinashilingam, 1960).

Experiments in Education in India

In the schools in Champaran, Gandhi and the volunteers tried to provide comprehensive education, including arithmetic, simple scientific principles, and manual labour training. As it progressed, the syllabus was refined. Grownups were trained in personal hygiene and community welfare activities. The volunteers who were the teachers, through their own example, motivated the villagers to care for themselves, scavenge, keep the surrounding clean, respect all forms of labour etc. In short, the Champaran schools illustrated the potential of an educational institution to become the axis of community development (Avinashilingam, 1960). In Sabarmati Ashram, Gandhi tried to "impart such education as is conducive to national welfare". Special attention was given to enrol women and 'untouchable' children. Emphasis was on measures to encourage character building. The lessons

learned from Tolstoy Farm helped Gandhi formulate the structure of education in Sabarmati Ashram (Gandhi, 1955). Following the Non-cooperation Movement, Gandhi took initiative to open many schools and colleges across India. Behar Vidyapith, Kashi Vidyapith, Gujarat Vidyapith and Jamia Millia Islamia were some of them. Teachers and students were encouraged to spend time in villages engaging in their service, doing welfare activities, and helping them in their livelihood. Gandhi took much effort to propagate the relevance and true objectives of education to the youth of the country. For this, he found opportunities to interact with students and to visit educational institutions during his travels across the country. The address given when he visited Madras is well known (Avinashilingam, 1960).

Following the 1935 general elections to the Central Legislative Assemblies, the Congress leaders obligated Gandhi to consolidate and structure his ideas on education to implement it in the states. The ironic reality that educational institutions were being sustained with liquor revenue hurt Gandhi severely and provoked him to envisage an educational system that would be self-supporting (Gandhi, 1937a). Gandhi called a conference of educationists at Wardha in 1937 and entrusted the Zakir Husain Committee to analyse the feasibility of the ideas he had earlier shared in Harijan. The outcome was called the 'Basic Education System'. Gandhi termed this system or perspective of education *Nai Talim* (Gandhi, 1937b).

Before moving further to broaden our understanding about *Nai Talim*, it is ideal to briefly rummage through the contextual particulars of the Wardha Conference in 1937.

Wardha Conference 1937

The National Education Conference at Wardha was organised on 22-23 October 1937, under the initiative of the Navabharat Vidyalaya as part of its silver jubilee celebrations. The Wardha Conference discussed the limitations of following English as the medium of instruction. It was agreed that the English language did not suit the country's needs and worsened the knowledge divide amongst the people, preventing the percolation of knowledge to the masses. Another path-breaking idea contemplated by the gathering was the possible benefits of including vocational training in profit-yielding vocations. It helped in the holistic development of the student and opened up the chances of generating sufficient income for the pupil and the school (Husain, 1938).

The Conference resolved to propose free and compulsory education for seven years with mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The curriculum should centre on any productive work intrinsic to the local environment, and all other faculties should be integrated with the chosen vocation. The child was expected to learn the art and science of the craft and learn to comprehend the basic lessons of life through its nuances, including its evolution, history, socio-cultural significance, and the various economic and political challenges vocation faces. The knowledge gets deeply embedded in the child, equipping her to survive with humility. Such a system would strive to inculcate elementary principles of sanitation, hygiene and nutrition in the students (Avinashilingam, 1960). The discourses of the Wardha Conference concluded with the report of the Zakir Husain Committee, published in 1938, and titled "Basic National Education". The Committee was constituted by nine stalwarts: Dr Zakir Husain (President), E.W. Aryanayakam (Convener), K. Gulam

Saiyidain, K.T. Shah, Vinoba Bhave, Kaka Kalekar, Kishorlal Mashruwala, J.C. Kumarappa, Shrikrishnadas Jaju and Srimati Asha Devi (Husain, 1938).

Report of the Zakir Husain Committee 1938

The Report comprised five sections: basic principles, objectives, training of teachers, supervision of examinations and administration. The report additionally proposed a detailed syllabus with a chart showing the scheme of coordination. In the first section, titled Basic Principles, the Committee enumerated the shortfalls of the existing educational system. It says, "[I]t does not train individuals to become useful productive members of society, able to pull their own weight and participate effectively in its work" (pg. 11). The section continued to highlight the contributions of Mahatma Gandhi and the Wardha Conference towards designing a new education system embedded in vocational training. The rest of the section discussed the particular benefits of craft training in schools- 'psychologically, it is desirable, because it relieves the child from the tyranny of a purely academic and theoretical instruction against which its active nature is always making a healthy protest'. The Committee used the expression, "the literacy of the whole personality" (Husain, 1938, pg. 13). The introduction of the new scheme was expected to deliver three-pronged outcomes. Socially, at one end, it would help break down the barriers of prejudice between physical and intellectual labour. On the economic front, as stated earlier, the productive capacity of the youth would be augmented. Educationally, the scheme would integrate knowledge with the realities of life, building character and confidence. Towards achieving these outcomes, it is imperative that the vocations should be chosen with utmost clarity. The craft should have educational and social relevance. The report explained that "the object of this new educational scheme is not primarily the production of craftsmen....but rather the exploitation for educational purposes of the resources implicit in craft work....and inspire the method of teaching all other subjects" (pg.14). The Committee was conscious to warn the society that the possibilities of evolving the schools into self-supporting institutions, from the income generated by the students, should not mar the true cultural and educational objectives.

The second section, titled Objectives, enumerated the main outlines of the seven years' course of basic education. It included the different 'basic crafts' that might be chosen by the schools favourable to the local and geographical conditions; the necessity of opting for mother tongue as the medium of education; the socio-psychological objectives of learning subjects like mathematics, social studies and the general sciences. The basic crafts suggested by Gandhi and the Committee included- spinning and weaving, carpentry, agriculture, fruit and vegetable gardening, leather work etc. Due emphasis should also be given to developing skills in drawing, music, sports etc. (Avinashilingam, 1960). Under the third section, the Committee highlighted the necessity of instituting appropriate training for the teachers. The new scheme would succeed only if the teachers transform their teaching methods and approach to the subject matter. The proposed three-year training programme included training in crafts and child psychology. The following section continued to discuss the methodology of supervision and examination. The existing mechanism was condemned as "inadequate, unreliable, capricious and arbitrary" (Husain, 1938). The final section of the report discussed the appropriate age for implementing compulsory education. The Committee chose the 'seven plus' pattern,

wherein schooling will be given from age seven to fourteen. They expressed concerns about leaving the children below the age of seven unattended but were aware of the financial burden of extending the age for primary education. The Committee Report, also known as the Wardha Scheme, was presented and approved in the Haripura session of the Indian National Congress in 1938. By October 1939, nearly 250 basic schools and a dozen training schools were set up. Gandhi established many institutions to practice Basic Education. Most impressive amongst those was the Hindustani Talimi Sangh (All India Basic Education Society), run by his Sri Lankan disciple E.W. Aryanayakam and his wife Asha Devi (Aryanayakam, 1950). However, the Second World War and the subsequent political developments marred the effective progression of the scheme.

In 1945, Gandhi once again tried to revive the new scheme of education with a wider scope and conviction. In this new scheme, education was for life, through life and throughout life. Education was spread over four stages of life: pre-basic education of children under seven; basic education for children between seven to fourteen; post-basic education of adolescents; and adult education. By then, Gandhi's idea of Basic Education became popular as Nai Talim, and it was perceived as a process aimed at developing the body, mind and spirit (Aryanayakam, 1950).

Nai Talim or Basic Education

Gandhi proposed Nai Talim as a recourse to holistic enlightenment of the body and intellect of the youth, empowering them to overcome their fears. He strongly believed that habits are formed, confidence is instilled, and strength of mind achieved while children are young. Gandhi envisaged craft at the centre of the curriculum, integrating and correlating the other subjects through and with the craft. Just as he emphasised the relevance of instruction in vernacular language, he comprehended the role of physical training in helping a child to develop his or her intellect. He suggested adding lessons in crafts at the primary and vocational training levels at higher levels to facilitate intelligent use of bodily organs and inculcate the dignity of labour in young minds. They must also be taught the importance of sanitation and hygiene. Another crucial component of Gandhi's Nai Talim was regular employment of the youth in social service, contributing to his ultimate aim of Sarvodaya. Simplicity and deep fellowship with nature were the other pillars of the Gandhian paradigm of education. This paradigm was foreseen as a liberating force for a new society deeply rooted in truth, non-violence, justice and equality (Geethika, 2019). Gandhi said, "the roots of Nai Talim go deeper. Education is that which gives true freedom. It is based on truth and non-violence in individual and collective life. This education cannot be given through the dry leaves of books. It can only be given through the book of life" (Kumarappa, 1953). Nai Talim imbibed the objective of character building in its best sense and paved the way towards achieving it through 'learning by doing'. All instructions were anchored on activities involving continuous craftwork.

Upon having tried to comprehend the features of Gandhi's vision on Education, Nai Talim, let us move further and assess how far the vision of the father of the nation has been inculcated into the draft National Education Policy 2019? Before we proceed in this direction, it is ideal to evaluate the new National Education Policy features briefly. The following section deals with the NEP.

Draft National Education Policy 2019 & Nai Talim

The government of India has placed before the public the Draft National Education Policy for reviews and comments. The 484-page document, drafted by the Committee chaired by K. Kasturirangan, former Chairman of ISRO, aims to complete the unfinished agenda of the former education policies of 1968 and 1986 (amended in 1992). The policy aims the "revision and revamping of all aspects of the education structure, its regulation and governance, to create a new system that is aligned with the aspirational goals of 21st century education, while remaining consistent with India's traditions and value systems" (MHRD-DNEP, 2019). In the following paragraphs, let us attempt a brief overview of the peculiarities of the policy.

The National Education Policy 2019 envisions "an India-centred education system that contributes directly to transforming our nation sustainably into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, by providing high quality education to all". The policy proposes structural changes in school education, higher education, teacher education, research and innovation. The 5+3+3+4 pattern of schooling starting from the Preparatory Stage at three years of age is the most discussed component of this change. The draft NEP also talks about the setting up of a state regulatory authority to accredit schools. Also interesting is the proposition to offer free and compulsory education up to grade 12. The policy also focuses on restructuring higher education into three levels- colleges for undergraduate education, teaching universities and research universities. More autonomy to colleges and the setting up of the National Research Foundation, Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog and the National Scholarship Fund are the other highlights. The other prominent points of the draft NEP are the promotion of classical and regional languages, mother tongue and multilingualism (DNEP, 2019). According to the policy, "a multilingual India is better educated and also better nationally integrated" (DNEP, 2019). Also, it discusses the integration of vocational and academic streams. The draft promises "flexibility and choice of subjects across the arts, humanities, sports, and vocational subjects" (Section 4.4) (MHRD-DNEP, 2019).

There have been remarks of certain similarities between the Gandhian idea of education and the new education policy under consideration. The Draft National Education Policy text does not explicitly mention Mahatma Gandhi or his vision on education. However, there is a deliberate attempt to establish an undeniable synergy between the proposed initiatives under the policy and the objectives of Nai Talim. This convergence is reflected in the words chosen to express the vision of the policy to steps envisaged under each part. The draft policy shares many of the Gandhian views on education. Statements such as "education must result in the full development of the human personality" (DNEP 2019, pg. 24) fully imbibe his vision. Beyond the similarity in the objectives, the draft policy also discusses the potentials of vocational education and skills development (DNEP 2019, Section 4.6.6). As we all know, Gandhian perspectives of education focused on this approach to education-learning through doing. Section 4.6.6, titled 'vocational exposure and skills', elaborates the modalities of exposing the students to vocational skills (MHRD-DNEP, 2019).

Yet again, draft NEP proposes to instil creativity, scientific temper and social responsibility in children, moulding them to be "engaged, productive and contributing citizens for building equitable, inclusive and plural society as envisaged by our Constitution". This is indeed in agreement with the goals of Nai Talim. Essentially, this is visualised through certain propositions which are undeniably

similar to the ideals put forth by Gandhi. The suggestion to incorporate ethical and moral principles and values of 'social responsibility', development of constitutional values etc., find a place in the draft in section 4.6.8 (MHRD-DNEP, 2019). Equally encouraging are the recommendations to impart education through the mother tongue and adopt measures to propagate interest in other languages through the policy of multilingualism. The policy shares the opinion of Gandhi that "young children become literate in and learn best through their local language" (DNEP, 2019, pg.79). The draft also points out the possible damage done by foreign languages on societies, for it "resulted in the marginalisation of large sections of society based on language" (MHRD-DNEP, 2019).

Just as Nai Talim gives due recognition to the role of teachers and their training, draft NEP also emphasises the various dimensions of teacher education. It essentially implies a necessity to take initiatives by the central and state governments to expedite more funds to the education sector. Principally, the new education policy aims to transform the youth through pedagogical and curricular revolution, along the lines of the lofty ideals of education envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi. But, beyond the façade, inquiring into the practicability of resurrecting Gandhi's vision on education through the NEP, compels us to vacillate on the potential of this education policy. A reality check on the proposals put forth by the policy shows many self-contradictory impracticalities. There is a lack of clarity on the effectiveness of pursuing teaching-learning in the mother tongue at the primary level and suddenly shifting to English in the higher classes. Adopting mother tongue as medium of instruction or first language at primary level schooling (formative years) was suggested on many occasions (Article 350A, Kothari Commission report, Right to Education Act, 2009 etc.), for it would enhance a child's comprehension, improves attendance and augments the self-esteem of the child. However, it calls for significant pedagogical changes, including new books and teachers (Khaitan, 2020). Experts in pedagogic studies and psychologists fear that if measures to improve English language proficiency is not given due consideration from an early age, it could impact the confidence of the youth while interacting with the global society at later stages of education and employment (Xhemaili, 2013).

When one views the said proposal about mother tongue in correlation with the plan to centralise the education system, doubts arise about the possibility of curtailing the role of the states. This would definitely undermine the chances of implementing vernacular language as the medium of instruction. Adding to this apprehension is the proposal to revive Sanskrit by promoting it as an option in the three-language formula (Sections 4.5.13-14) (MHRD-DNEP, 2019). Beyond the charming projection of vocational education in the draft policy, it faces some crucial hurdles in its path to fruition. Incorporating vocational education necessitates a total restructuring of the curriculum and teaching perspectives. A grave oversight by NEP in visualising vocational education as a Gandhian ideal is that Gandhi was not advocating it as a complementary subject alongside mainstream education. It says, "some exposure to practical vocational-style training is always fun for young students, and for many students it may offer a glimpse of future professions" (pg. 94) (MHRD-DNEP, 2019). NEP appears to have missed the point that Gandhi proposed a pedagogical reform wherein different subjects in the curriculum would be taught through the vocation by carefully devising a technique of correlation. More importantly, Gandhi wanted this strategy to be implemented at the level of primary

education so that a child would learn the basics of reading, writing and calculation through the practical lessons of the vocation.

Conclusion

To conclude, Nai Talim is all about education for life, through life and throughout life. Gandhi understood that it was imperative to pay attention to the needs of the child's 'heart and spirit' instead of the curriculum only focussing on physical and intellectual development. In his autobiography, Gandhi said, "[T]o develop the spirit is to build character and to enable one to work towards a knowledge of God and self-realisation" (Avinashilingam, 1960). He sought to teach the people that education was over and above literacy and numeracy. It encompassed training in personal hygiene, moral insight, manual labour and character building. Regarding vocational training, we must understand that Gandhi wanted the young to be introduced to the 'why and wherefore of every process' involved in the vocation. Like his views on many other aspects of life, Gandhi's perspectives on education have always enthused people around the world. A visionary who walked ahead of time, Gandhi practised what he preached and has laid open the potentials of a new pedagogical and curricular revolution. The draft NEP appears to adopt a few of his ideas. But, the operational discrepancies are way too heavy to be ignored, for it could sabotage the entire idealism postulated by the policy. Not only would Gandhian ideals go unachieved, but also severely damage the educational system of the country. Hence, it is yet to be seen whether the Indian polity is capable of realising the vision of the father of the nation.

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