



The philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi on preschool education and child development: A reflection

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Abstract

Education is one of the most defining features in the life of human. It enables one to acquire literacy, to analyse the situations with logic and wisdom and also use it greatly for individual as well as social development. As a key instrument in character-building, it enables the children to determine the course of their thoughts and actions and also achieve goals and ideals of life. This is the logic to which Gandhi attached greater importance. Gandhi was also a great social reformer. He was unquestionably one of the greatest advocates of modern education in India. Gandhis philosophy aimed at the truthful and non-violent way of life and the ultimate goal of self-realisation. Concept of *Basic Education*, *Nai Talim*, The indigenous Schools, the *vocational training* to the children and education to girl child are not merely his dreams, in his way Education is a mean for all round development of a child to make them self reliant. His methods for education to the children from early age were simple and practical and this was evident in his scheme of education.

This paper aims to understand and review the philosophy of Gandhiji on basic education and development of a child.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, pre school education, basic education, nai-talim, Gandhian ideology

Introduction

Gandhi was a firm believer in the essential unity of man and all lives. His faith in God, truth and non-violence enabled him to lead a much disciplined life and attain a spirit of moral superiority in all his actions. He envisioned a society free of exploitation and injustice and a social structure based on moral and equitable principles. His steadfast reliance on his principles all through his life, even under adverse circumstances made it possible for him to translate his ideals into practice. In his work on the Educational Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, Gandhi's philosophy of education can be summarise in these words: 'with the object of realizing his ideal of a spiritual society as a stepping-stone to the realisation on God or truth, Gandhiji evolved an educational system as a dynamic side of his philosophy. There is a unity running through his concrete schemes and plans, making them a complete system of philosophy'.

Before understanding Gandhi's views on education, it is necessary to know the background of the educational system which was introduced during the British rule. By the end of 19th century, the modern education system totally replaced the old and indigenous system of India. The system in the villages that ran public institutions like temples, monasteries, hospitals and schools were replaced with the advent of British and gave way to the adoption of English language, destroying the indigenous culture and found an immediate acceptance from the younger generation. When Gandhi came back to india he visited all over the country to understand the society, people and their life. During his visit to England In 1931, in the Council on Constitutional Reforms organized by the British Government, Gandhi gave a detailed description of the decline of education in India during the British period. Gandhiji said in a historic speech at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London's Chatham House on 20 October 1931 that when the British administrators came to India, they did not accept the situation

here as it is. They began to scrape the ground, they began to inspect the roots and then left it open... and the beautiful tree of education was destroyed. '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'. Here Gandhi's theory of education evolved against these glaring discrepancies.

Review of Literature

In Everyones Gandhi, A collection of Gandhi Columns editor Roy, Rita has written that, Gandhi was no book worm. Yet, such reading as he did, affected him greatly. In one instance, it even changed him almost overnight. As Gandhi says: During the days of my education I had read practically nothing outside textbooks, and after I launched into active life I had very little time for reading. I cannot therefore claim much book knowledge. However, I believe I have not lost much because of this enforced restraint. On die contrary, the limited reading may be said to have enabled me thoroughly to digest what I did read. Of these books, the one that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life was Unto This Last.... This book came into Gandhi's hands in curious circumstances. In 1903 when he was leaving for Durban on a business trip. His friend Henry Polak came to see him off at the railway station in Johannesburg and gave him a book to read during the long journey. This was John Ruskin's *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy*, published in 1860. The 34-year old Gandhi read the work all through the journey of twenty- four hours. As he reached the last page, deeply reflecting all the while, he had come to a firm decision: he would change his entire outward life in accordance with the ideals set forth by John Ruskin. Many years after, stressing what he owed to Great Britain, Gandhi wrote: "Great Britain gave me Ruskin, whose Unto This Last

transformed me overnight from a lawyer and city-dweller into a rustic living away from Durban on a farm, three miles from the nearest railway station."

Constructive programme

Its meaning and place, which Gandhi wrote on the train from Sevagram to Bardoli, he appealed to all people and others engaged in the freedom struggle to address the issues of swadshi and self-reliance, Education was one of them. The original thirteen items were: (1) Communal Unity (2) Removal of Untouchability (3) Prohibition (4) Khadi (5) Village Industries (6) Village Sanitation (7) Nai Talim or Basic Education (8) Adult Education (9) Women (10) Knowledge of Health and Hygiene (11) Provincial languages (12) National Language (13) Economic Inequality. To this, he added five more items: (1) Kisans (2) Labour (3) Adivasis (4) Lepers (5) Students. The 18-point constructive programme thus became his framework for the new India he wished to see after Swaraj. The ideas on Education and child development were expressed in his ideology and philosophy of constructive programme.

Development of educational thoughts

Gandhi's life was based on experiment. Whatever he did and said, it was tested through experiment and then he set examples to the others. The things said above were also based on their own experience based on their experimentation and experience. In fact, his educational principles developed during his stay in South Africa. This stay was the most important period of Gandhiji's character building and his exploration of Satyagraha. Based on these experiences and thought process, he started spreading his educational ideas, which emerged in the form of National Education Movement, under which people established institutions, Vidyapeeths, Veda Pathshalas etc. Later, all these efforts became the basis for the development of Indian education under the leadership of Gandhiji. In the year 1937 Gandhi ji's views on education took their final shape and development in to a philosophy of education after a long drawn-out process of experience and experiments for forty years in South Africa and India.

Aim of education according to Gandhi

Gandhi put his views on education first time clearly in his book *Hind Swaraj*. His philosophy of education has certain aims which were did not undergo any material change later on even in different stages. The aim of his education is:

Building self-reliant citizens

By teaching human for labor he wanted to build skilled citizens. Wanted to see every person doing production work by physical exertion. It can be started from childhood by giving such education in which the child becomes involved in a useful enterprise for himself and the society, gets attached to it.

Establishment of Sarvodaya Samaj

His goal was to establish a Sarvodaya-hard-working society by giving equal opportunities to all the people in the society for development. All human beings should have the right to equality and freedom in society.

Establishment of village Swaraj

Gandhiji wanted to prepare Indian society for independence before freedom from British slavery. He wanted man to be free from all forms of exploitation. Establishment of Sarvodaya society by developing the best human and physical qualities in human beings was his basic objective and the basic mantra for the creation of this society was the establishment of Gram Swaraj. Villagers wanted to establish self-government with local resources and rural economic resources and resources. His goal was that every member of the society and family should contribute in the development of the family and society with their own strength and energy. This was possible only through education because education is the only means which leads to the full development of all the better instincts and abilities of man.

Character building

The basic aim of education according to Gandhi is to make man a human in the true sense. Education which does not contribute to the development of human virtues and does not pave the way for the all-round development of the individual, is useless. Being human is the most important education, for this, the education of character development is the main aim of education.

Philosophy and methods of education in Gandhian way

According to Gandhi the all-round development of child should be the prime focus of education. The aim of education is the all round development of all the best abilities of the child's mind, heart and body. In Harijan, 1937, Gandhi explained as to what he understood by education: 'by education, I mean 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 one of the means whereby man and woman can be educated'. In practical terms, to acquire the ability to think, to understand human qualities-feelings and sensations, to acquire the ability to work for the welfare of oneself, family, society and country with proper physical exertion, is true education and all-round development. He Expressed, One word only as to the education of the heart. I do not believe that this can be imparted through books. It can only be done through the living touch of the teacher. And, who are the teachers in the pre schools and even in primary schools. Are they man and Women of faith and character? Have they themselves received the training of the heart? He said that when our children are admitted to the schools, they need, not slate and pencil and books, but simple village tools which they can handle freely and remuneratively. Only so called knowledge of three 'R's that is at present given in the schools can not serve the purpose of life for boys and girls. Gandhi had expressed that the scheme that I am adumbrating does not exclude literary training. No course of primary instruction would be considered complete that did not include reading, writing and arithmetic. Only, reading and writing would come during the last year when really the boy or girl is all set for learning the alphabets correctly. For children he expressed that handwriting is an art. Every letter must be correctly drawn, as an artist would drawn his figure. He admitted that he doesn't care about his hand writing in early days and childhood but in later years he realized that Good hand writing put an extra confidence to the nature and behaviour of a child. Some of the practical methods and exercises he described for the development of child in his educational thought in Wardha scheme in year 1937, and this was only a step forward,

- Boys and Girls should be taught together.
- Their time should be mostly spent on manual work under the supervision of a teacher. This manual work should be considered as a part of education.
- The child should know the *Why* and the *How* of every process.
- General knowledge should be imparted to the child as soon as he is able to understand the things.
- The hand of the child should be trained to draw geometrical figures before he learns to write, i.e, good handwriting should be taught from the beginning.
- The child should learn to read before he is able to write, means he should learn to recognize letters as if they were pictures and then draw their figures. Through this method and by word of mouth- oral expressions, the child should acquire much knowledge before he is eight years old.
- Children should not be bound to learn anything and he should be interested in learning.
- The process of teaching should be conducted in a playful manner.
- All the education should be imparted through mother tongue of the children.

These were some of the basic and necessary thoughts of Gandhi on methods and principles of education to the child and its overall development.

Pre school education-present scenario

At Present the New Education Policy has been introduced and a significant focus has been given to the pre school or ECCE. The NEP 2020 emphasises universal provisioning of quality early childhood development care and education for all children from the age of 3 years, to be achieved by 2030. The expansion of ECCE is proposed through four pronged strategies: 1) stand-alone Anganwadis; 2) Anganwadis co-located with primary schools; 3) pre-primary sections co-located with primary schools;

and 4) stand-alone pre-schools. On the one hand, pre-school education significantly aids in the overall development of a child, involving its physical, social, emotional and cognitive aspects. On the other hand, education prior to primary schooling, as research evidences show, tends to have a major impact on her/his future learning prospects. Thus, it is a widely known fact that, the pre-school education lays the foundation and creates readiness among children to pursue formal school education.

What Gandhiji has said and research evidence also indicates that the children between the ages of four to six become mentally ready for more structured, but play based, learning environment. All children and those from disadvantaged communities in particular, require at this stage an appropriate school readiness programme which ought to be directed by the child's interests and priorities in contextualised and flexible manner. As per the Census (2011), India has 158.8 million children in the 0-6 age group, of which around 60 million children are estimated to be in the age group of 3-6 years.¹ In India, although the gross enrolment ratio at pre-school level has been recorded at about 55 per cent over time, there are still approximately 20 million children accounting nearly 27 per cent of the total in the three-to-six-year age group who are not attending pre-school (UNICEF, 2016). This demands that India must ensure a significantly higher enrolment in pre-schools for improving education outcomes at the elementary and secondary levels. The State of the World's Children Report 2016 by the agency pointed out that children in the "poorest families and in the marginalised communities are often left behind". While 34 per cent of Muslim children did not attend pre school, around 25.9 per cent Hindus and 25.6 per cent Christians also could not attend pre-school education. The proportion of such children was nearly 30 per cent among Scheduled Castes. Anganwadi centres cater to 3.7 crore children through 13.7 lakh Anganwadi centres (45 per cent centres or six lakhs and three thousand are co-located within school complexes). Table 1 shows the Statics of Status of Pre School Education in India.

Table 1: Status of Pre School Education (ECCE) in India

Data	No.	Source
Total No. of Anganwadi centres operational	13,77,595	ICDS report updated as on 30th June 2019
Total child population of 6 months to 3 years age cohort	3,82,03,017	ICDS report updated as on 30th June 2019
Total child population of age 3-6 years	3,05,09,301	ICDS report updated as on 30th June 2019
Total No. of Anganwadi workers/ teachers	13,77,595	ICDS report updated as on 30th June 2019
Total No. of schools	11,68,292	UDISE (2018-19) (Provisional)
Total schools with primary sections	8,26,842	UDISE+ 2018-19 (Provisional)
Total primary schools with pre-primary sections	1,94,768	UDISE+ 2018-19 (Provisional)
Total No. of schools to be covered for preparatory class	7,01,537	Schools excluded having already pre-primary sections
Total No. of children enrolled in the attached pre-primary section	29,94,751	UDISE 2017-18 (Provisional)

Source: NCERT and MHRD

Challenges

Some major challenges are there, as in current situation Anganwadi workers are not oriented to meet the school readiness programme or pre school education of children of 3-6 years of age. The access to preschool education, therefore, needs to be improved as the initial years of child are crucial and cognitive and intellectual developments take place faster during these years. At present the proportion of children attending pre-primary education in Government schools is only 32.7 per cent indicating differentiation in schooling access by management of schools at this stage. Some of the other challenges include: provisioning of adequate quality preschools with necessary physical and academic infrastructures: play materials, teaching learning materials, barrier-free access to all indoor and outdoor spaces; and separate toilets for boys and girls, for different ages of children; safe and comfortable school environment ensuring availability of appropriate accessories and facilities for children with special needs. Definitely these also needs comprehensive curriculum and planning to execute it in the pre schools.

Conclusion

For Gandhi, education is something like an 'awakening of the soul', and 'strengthening the inner voice'. True education, as he opined, brings about a harmonious functioning of the body, heart, mind and soul and stimulates the spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties. He felt that an undue emphasis on any one of these factors not only negates the basic principles of education but also retards the development of the self. Gandhi highly disapproved of the education system in India as being harmful, wasteful, unethical and artificial. 'Most of the boys', he said, 'are lost to the parents and to the occupation to which they are born. They pick up evil habits, affect urban ways and get a smattering of something which may be anything but education'. He explained the purpose as imparting 'education of the body and the mind and the soul through handicraft that is taught to the children' to sum it up in his own words, it is 'an intelligent use of the bodily organs in a child that provides the best and quickest way of developing his intellect'.

Finally, Humanism is the essential part of Gandhi's philosophy of Education. Mahatma Gandhi's educational thought and his fundamental ideas are a guide towards making the society self-reliant by leading children and youth towards self-reliance. Gandhi was clear that the education of citizens is the backbone of any society. So he envisioned a new educational system for the non-violent society of his dream and used it for many years. He believed that basic education should be linked to life and used for the development of mind, body and soul. It was Gandhi's unflinching belief that children have immense power and potential. The nature and environment of society in which children are born and raised can be very instructive for their own life and development. They can learn many things from practical work and from direct experiences. So all these opinions are very practical and useful for providing universal access to the Pre School Education to each and every child. We can hope that through practicing Gandhian ideology of Pre School Education and philosophy of Child Development we will be able to implement the National Education Policy 2020 in a complete and comprehensive mode.

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