

CHAPTER – 11

GANDHI'S THEORY OF EDUCATION AS A WAY OF LIFE

Gandhi titled his autobiography 'My Experiment with Truth'. Indeed, his life was an experiment not only with the strategies of the freedom movement but with almost anything under the sun. Gandhi's experimentation with education started during his at the Tolstoy Farm in South Africa. That experience of teaching served as the groundwork of Gandhiji's later formulation of the Wardha scheme of Basic Education.

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and founded his Asrama at Sabarmati. Here he whole-heartedly devoted himself to training and educating the inmates of the Asrama in truth-speaking, non-violence, untouchability, pious living, and so on which are called ashrama-vows. After about twenty years he established another Asrama at Sevagram, Wardha. This is the place where Gandhiji propounded his famous scheme of Basic Education. We thus find that Gandhiji's Nai Talim or 'New Education' is the outcome of his educational experiments and experiences at these three places, namely, Tolstoy Farm, Sabarmati Asrama, Sevagrama Asrama.

Considering the British system of education as impractical and destructive of the Indian imagination, Gandhi called it an 'unmitigated evil'. *¹ He thought it ignored everything India had discovered in its educational experience, such as children integrated with environment, strong pupil-teacher relationships, identity with a people and an appreciation of Indian culture. Hence Gandhi's plan for the nation was an attempt to restore the national and social continuum disrupted by English imposition. The British placed education within the ambit of literacy. Gandhi sharply distinguished literacy from knowledge and wrote that "Literacy in itself is no

education". *² Since the school was an extension of the home for Gandhi, he sought continuity in language and culture between the school and home. He spoke, moreover, against an emphasis on literature as a basic context for learning. He called for a broader basis in education and not just training in literature and literacy. He believed that the building of character, the development of skills in living and working, and the imparting of an appreciation and understanding of Indian culture were for more crucial.

The purpose of Gandhian education is to raise man to a higher moral and spiritual order through the full development of the individual and the evolution of a new man, a non-violent personality. Everything in Gandhi's thought is related to the universal value of truth and ahimsa and directed toward the realization of God and a new humanity. Thus his educational scheme is best understood and appreciated within the framework of the rest of his philosophy. Truth and ahimsa are the two principles entering into every aspect of his thought and activity. There is an identity of ideals between truth and ahimsa and the wardha scheme for basic education. Truth, non-violence, service to humanity and fearlessness were Gandhi's goals, and education became the means to these goals. He believed education was the natural context for the cultivation of non-violent values since ahimsa could be discovered and exercised in the relations among children. The non-violent personality was the principal and immediate focus of education for Gandhi. Truth can neither be attained nor lived without non-violence and, consequently, the school must impart non-violent values.

The creation of a new personality through character building was the fundamental enterprise in the school he envisioned. He looked upon the development of personality as far more significant than the accumulation of intellectual tools and

academic knowledge. He sought the mastery of the whole personality, and since truth is the basis of personality education should develop the highest truth possible in the mind, the spirit and the body. Good education is “that which draws out and stimulates the spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties of children.” *³ The qualities of the harmonious personality are self-control, universally non-violent, selfless social activity, fearlessness, with all life centered in truth, schools and colleges thus become the context for character formation.” *⁴

The building of character in terms of non-violence and truth is a form of spiritual education. But Gandhi’s goal was the spiritual refashioning of the whole personality through education. Education for Gandhi does not mean new spiritual knowledge. Knowledge includes all training that is useful for the service of man. Gandhian education has been characterized as encompassing the head, the heart and the hands. The cultivation of the heart emotions and feelings consists in the refinement of human emotions and impulses; it promotes feelings of love, sympathy and fellowship. The keynote of Gandhi’s thought in creative activity is education. He wanted education to deal more with the concrete, and so made manual work and crafts an integral part of the school system. He believed that a child up to fourteen or fifteen has a natural capacity to grasp the concrete.

Mind and heart can only be refined if the hand is brought into activity, drawing the educative process more into life. He thought that students could be self-supporting to some degree and this could be accomplished if the child worked manually as he learned. Gandhi’s notion of self-supporting education cannot be separated from the non-violent personality. He placed emphasis on the child’s experiences in daily life and work, experiences which foster cooperative activity and not competitive individualism. An educational programme, moreover, must be

attractive enough for the student to enthusiastically approve it himself. If education is true to life, it requires continual testing. Gandhi believed that education required the "boldest experiments". *⁵ All Gandhi's socio-political principles entered his plan for national education, but experimentation was the one essential for education to be true to life. He placed education into the larger context of his thought and practice, that is, the development of the person materially morally and spiritually. Such development, he believed, brought about the non-violent personality who would serve his fellow man.

Gandhi's educational theory had a clear social orientation. The school is basically a community linked to social achievements. He envisioned true education coming about primarily through a particular pattern of life in a community and not merely through instruction. The realization of the spiritual society was a prelude to the realization of truth and God. Hence education had a social setting and purpose whereby human perfection could be achieved in a community and in the creation of the perfect society. The school must be in Gandhi's plan an organized society itself which is engaged in some fruitful activity contributing to the greater society. A social orientation in education, he believed, strengthens social and cooperative attitude in a practical manner. Yet the school has the special task of preparing citizens of the new society, in this case the non-violent society, by teaching youth to live together as a community on the basis of co-operation, truth and non-violence. The social orientation Gandhi gave to the schools was similar to what he tried to achieve in his ashrams. He conceived the Sevagram Ashram as a place where the community was created, where equally ruled, where hatred was stamped out and honesty was required. The most visible aspects of Sevagram were cooperation, sympathy and self-

help. Gandhi anticipated the school as the builder of the new non-violent society because his fundamental conception of society was spiritual.

Gandhi maintained that a programme in basic education must assuage the poverty of India. With eight percent of Indians living in villages, Gandhi realized that education could spearhead a silent but forceful social revolution. One major reason he advocated education through the teaching of craft was to check the decay of the villages. Education through a craft, he believed, would place the destiny of the masses in their own hands and give them a sense of dignity and identity. Education as part of swadeshi was conceived as education that was national in spirit, methods and goals. Every body must have compulsory technical education, so that whoever goes out of school will have learnt a craft by which he can earn something. Written into the Wardha scheme of education were means to review and regenerate village crafts, industries and the spirit of village life. The Gandhian plan must be evaluated within the context of village education or it will be misunderstood and misjudged. None the less, he saw the basic plan as developing a national consciousness. He strongly spoke for education that would meet all the needs of the people, social, economic, political and cultural.

So, to Gandhi if education is the builder of the new non-violent society, schools must be self-sufficient and self-supporting. This is the heart of Gandhi's emphasis on the social orientation in education. He is not introducing something novel but has in mind classical monasticism which has always been self supporting and self-sufficient. Education through a craft could possibly render education self-supporting. It would certainly render the individual self-supporting in the future. Gandhi wrote : "Self-sufficiency is not an a priori condition, but to me, it is the acid test." *⁶ Maintaining that three generations of non violent life within a society are

necessary to change a people, Gandhi looked to education to give people the self-support necessary for a non-violent society to actualize and stabilize itself. Hence the genesis of the new social order would be the schools.

Naturalism, Idealism and Pragmatism can be found respectively in the setting, aims and method of the educational philosophy of Gandhi. Naturalism in education is apparent from Gandhi's tendency toward simplicity in life, in language and literature and in his opposition to pedantry. Basic education was natural for he saw it as an extension of the home as related to the child's environment. He believed in the essential goodness of children, and that education must follow the natural and progressive growth of both the child and the child's culture. Learning within the Gandhian schools takes place in an atmosphere of play which is child-centered and respects the freedom of the child.

On the other hand, his basic aim to develop a spiritual man within a spiritual society has been historically the idealist goal in educational theory. Conceiving education as a preparation for total life and not necessarily for a specific profession is another idealist goal. Yet his ideal of self realization, that is, the more perfect attainment of truth and non-violence, were the most motivating educational goals for him. His idealism was of a practical sort.

Pragmatism was explicit in the methodology of Gandhi's educational theory. For example, the development of manual skills is integral to the Wardha scheme which was focused around three interrelated centres : Physical environment, social environment and a craft. The Wardha plan envisaged primary education, compulsory and universal, for seven years covering all subjects except English, plus a vocational skill. Primary education was to take the place of the classical primary, middle and high school plan initiated by the British. Progress in the schools was to be pragmatic,

based on rigorous habits on investigation and experimentation through scientific thinking. In advancing the principle of self-sufficiency, Gandhi insisted that the schools be self-supporting to the degree that the teachers were paid for their services. Condemning boorishness and excessive verbalizing in teaching, he advanced realistic education in his effort to move the schools into the affairs of society. He wanted to close the gap between education and life by drawing upon the cultural, social and vocational potentialities of students.

Gandhi is consonant with John Dewey who also believed that elements of social life should be integrated in the school system. Their ideas arose from the divorce of school and home. Dewey, also advocating an adult occupation in the schools, said that Gandhi was “one step ahead of all the other systems and is full of immense potentialities.” *⁷ The similarities between Gandhian education and the work of Dewey are of interest not because of mutual influences of one upon the other but because Gandhi received confirmation from Dewey’s system in the course he had set for himself.

The use of a craft at all levels and in all stages of education was Gandhi’s specification of education as a Karma-yoga. Early in his career he had developed the notion of ‘Bread Labour’ and this ethic was operative in his activities in South Africa in 1904. This introduction and use of craft in education becomes the sources out of which experiences and activities are born. Gandhi proposed with the utilization of craft a change in the medium of instruction which ultimately altered the character of and language through which education was usually imparted. His conception of craft is not a mere addition of a subject to the curriculum but is a radical change in educational methodology. Labour in Gandhian education is the unifying and integrating factor because its goal is to combine the intellectual, the scientific and the

physical growth of students. Gandhi considered productive manual activity as the perfect medium of education especially between the ages of seven and fourteen. *⁸

Probably the major factor in Gandhi's educational reform was that all intellectual instruction be imparted through the instrumentality of the craft. *⁹ This implied that manual labour, intelligently correlated with an academic subject, was the best means for intellectual growth. Children must be taught the dignity of labour and learn to regard it as the means of intellectual growth. The crafts selected for education should be rich in educational opportunities and easily correlated with daily life. Also pertinent were the local conditions which should favourably support the craft selected. In the plan basic education designed for the first seven years of school, Gandhi recommended the craft predominant in the locality, for example spinning, carpentry, gardening and agriculture.

After the basic education beyond the fourteenth year, the craft should become more sophisticated, such as mechanics, electricity, medicine, commerce, printing and the domestic arts. Each school should have five or six crafts in order to give a variety of opportunities to the students. Craft-centered education is not necessarily production; it does not have as its goal the training of craftsmen but the utilization of craft activity for educative purposes. Craft is the genesis of educative experience for Gandhi. Yet craft is both a means and an end. The product of the craft must be economically usable. In the Wardha Scheme all education around a craft and the product of the craft was to be economically remunerative in order to defray the costs of education, at least the salaries of the teachers. The connection between craft as a medium of education and education as economically self-sufficient was important to Gandhi. Unless the later is true, the first fails. He maintained that only remunerative craft work would be done with care and be a scientific improvement in the educative

process. In practice he found that productivity was an essential condition for any craft to succeed as an element of correlated instruction.

Gandhi considered the instruction of craft his unique contribution to education for he believed that it would refashion education, society in general and the personality of youth. In the Gandhian plan it is achieved through the interpenetration of manual labour in many subjects. Since craft is both a means and an end, it is "the concerning point for instruction in all other subjects." *¹⁰ Craft and subject must be correlated to the physical and social environment since the principle of self-activity operative in correlation bears intimate relationship to the needs of the student and his familiar social world. The correlation of craft and subject, according to Gandhi, was the principal means of relating the child to the villages, and ultimately, the villages to the cities. The technique of correlation assures that the craft becomes a medium of education and not of mere vocational training. If the craft is to relate the child to life, it must find the natural point of correlation with human activities and interests and extend to the whole curriculum. Correlation is the technique to bind education to the child's life and beyond.

Gandhi never worked out the details and technique of correlation. He had given it only an ideological basis. The capacity for successful correlation depended upon the unity of the craft itself as an integrative element and upon its comprehensiveness whereby it could naturally be extended to other areas of knowledge. Three stages eventually were developed in correlation: firstly, the recollection of an element of knowledge already assimilated from the craft; secondly, the forming of a relationship from the element of knowledge to an academic subject; thirdly, the drawing out of a new element of knowledge bound to the previous one by the newly established relationship. Since correlative teaching aimed at establishing a

medium of instruction encompassing the total mass of knowledge, over-strained or spurious correlation had to be avoided. It is neither unilateral, that is, one subject correlated with one activity, nor bilateral, that is, knowledge and activity correlated simultaneously but is multilateral, correlation of many subjects with a craft-activity.

Basic education through correlation was directed toward the integration of the student and the integration of curriculum. The Gandhian curriculum consisted of the craft, the mother tongue of the student, mathematics, social studies, natural science, music and drawing, and Hindustani. There was no instruction in either religion or English. Gandhi considered Hindustani the most opportune common language because it would be familiar to both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Hindustani is the same spoken language a Hindi or Urdu which differ only in script. Primary education, according to Gandhi, should employ as few books as possible and most teaching should be oral. Hence he suggested that the first year at school be completely without books. The timetable in basic education was carefully worked out by Gandhi himself: craft, three hours and twenty minutes a day; music, drawing and mathematics, forty minutes; social studies and natural science, thirty minutes; and physical training, ten minutes. The scheduling indicated the centrality he gave to craft-centered education.

Gandhi offered his plan to the whole nation. Since his basic conception was to organically relate education to Indian social, economic and political life he thought it should be relevant for higher education also. In fact he saw university education as a natural extension of his basic education plan. Many of the arts in the colleges, he believed, were both a waste of time and a cause of employment. University education should be a continuation of basic education, and it should be coordinated and brought into line with primary education. Although diversified institutions should exist, he

saw the key principles of his educational theory relevant in all situations. Government should not administer higher education, according to Mahatma, and colleges and universities should be left to private enterprise. In this way the national needs in industry, technology, the arts and letters can be better met.

The most effective point in Gandhi's plan consists in the pattern of living for teacher and student alike and not in his syllabus or curriculum. *¹¹ The teacher of the Gandhian hue has been described as one who saves the pupil from a tyranny of words. The ideal teacher is one who consistently follows truth and ahimsa, one who is a practitioner of non-violence. Good education, according to Gandhi, takes place in association with a teacher who is non-violent. He believed that a teacher who doesn't inculcate truth leads students to perdition. *¹²

The teacher is particularly relevant for the education of the heart of "education of heart could only be done through the living touch of the teacher." *¹³ He called upon teachers to cultivate their own life and to encounter their student with a "heart-contact". *¹⁴ Gandhi advocates devotion to the teacher. In terms of the classical teacher-disciple relationship, the guru in Gandhi's estimation should be the epitome of devotion in order to elicit devotion from the student. He felt that in the absence of devotion to the teacher education would be dissipated and the building of character difficult to achieve. Gandhi, of course, anticipated a non-violent personality in the teacher, but the prevalent trait of a teacher was devotion to students, devotion to service and to God. The teacher has a mother's role in primary education whereby he is fully present to the student, nurtures him, lives with him and brings him to levels of greater maturity. He urged teachers not only to cultivate non-violent virtues but also to express non-violence daily in contact with their pupils. Although teaching without development of the spirit was of little use to him, spiritual development was

always more difficult than physical and intellectual training: “And the exercise of the spirit entirely depends on the life and character of the teacher.” *15

Gandhi’s advocated the teaching of classical principles of ethics which are found in all religions. “These should certainly be taught to the children and that should be regarded as adequate religious instruction so far as the schools under the Wardha Scheme are concerned.” *16 He considered the teaching of a universal code of ethics as the function of the state. For a liberal education, he believed, a reverent study of other religions was necessary. If adequately done the study of other religions would give the student a reassurance in his own tradition and a better appreciation for it. Gandhi tried to create an equal respect for all religions. Religion, for him, stood on the same footing as culture and civilization, where preservation means the assimilation of the best.

Gandhi’s notion of religious education is the cultivation of universal love and brotherhood; it is “instruction in the universal essentials of religion.” *17 In practice religious education is the formation of fundamental virtues such as truth and *ahimsa*. So, to him, religion means truth and *ahimsa* or rather truth alone, because truth includes *ahimsa*, *ahimsa* being the necessary and indispensable means for its discovery.

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