

UNDERSTANDING THE RELEVANCE OF GANDHIAN BASIC EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES WITH REFERENCE TO NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical attempt to understand the Gandhian model of skill- based self-reliant school education and its relevance in contemporary times. In a global economy indigenous skills can prove a part of school vocational training programmes and a source of income to establish glocal goods. The paper also tries to establish the need and significance of vocational education at the school level after the pandemic. In recent times, the mainstream and professional courses dominate over the vocational courses. The paper looks at the gaps in vocational education programmes to find out the reasons for marginalization. The paper also deliberates upon the provisions relating to vocation and skills in the new education policy 2020. The issues related to skill choices, empowerment, community participation, and the global economy has also been looked into.

Keywords: Basic Education, self-reliance, school education, vocational and skill education, NEP 2020

INTRODUCTION

“...education for life, education through life, and education throughout life.”

– Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi gave the scheme of education which not only proposed to inculcate human values in children but also to make them self-reliant. We can say it was the first model of vocationalisation of education of modern India which claimed that school can also contribute positively not only in economic growth but also in national income. Gandhi did not deny the importance of 3R's but certainly questioned it at the early years of schooling. He envisioned childhood education full of activity and practical experiences which could be monetarily productive, which was impossible without community support and cooperation. This new wave of education was about the integration of theory, practice and productivity

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on one hand and an integration of school and community on the other. His foresightedness to assess the economic situations in years to come was remarkable. He felt that independent India would be generating job opportunities in large numbers but for the selective talented/skilled masses and many educated individuals would remain unemployed. It seems contradictory. There is no denying the fact that post- independence government initiated industrial setups on a large scale. Many establishments in health, education and manufacturing sectors were set up. Quite a few job opportunities were created and opportunities for entrepreneurship were opened. But vocational/skill proficiency appeared to be the demand for all jobs. People who had talent, flourished.

GANDHIAN MODEL OF SKILL-BASED SELF-RELIANT SCHOOL EDUCATION

In 1937 Gandhi proposed Basic Education, a commendable initiative to integrate education with skills. He wanted to see schools, especially those in rural areas, as production/craft units. Basic National Education (*Buniyadi Shiksha*), which was popularly known as Wardha scheme of education, also aimed at bringing about a change in the hearts, minds and souls of the children. In his words in *Harijan*, “Education must be of a new type for the sake of the creation of a new world.” He explained it further, “our system of (Basic)education leads to the development of the mind, body, and soul. By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man, body, mind and spirit...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. True education is that which draws out the spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties of the child” (Bala,2005). Kabir (1995) further adds that these faculties would be developed through systematic and graded performances of activities connected with some familiar craft. In his own words, “The principal idea is to impart the whole education of the body and the mind and the soul through the handicraft that is taught to the children. You have to draw out all that is in the child through teaching all the processes of the handicraft and all your lessons in history, geography and arithmetic will be related to craft” (Kabir,1995).

Gandhi’s vision of education was very broad; on the one hand, he valued humanity, spirituality, and physicality and on the other, productivity and socio-economic equality and justice. “There will be neither paupers nor beggars, nor high nor low, neither millionaire employers nor half-starved employees” (Bala, 2005).

The education system proposed by Gandhi not only emphasised an all-round development of the personality but also to train the individual in some vocation/s to cater to the economic needs of the members of the society vis-a-vis the nation. He felt *if an individual has a right towards the necessities of life, he also has a duty to do some manual work with his body*. To make people self-reliant and self-supporting, his new scheme of education, also known as *NaiTalim*, in training of a handicraft got a central place. In his vision, “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 a means of their intellectual growth, and to realize that it is patriotic to pay for their training through their labour. The one of my suggestions is that handicrafts are to be taught, not merely for productive work, but for developing the intellect of the pupils” (Bala,2005). According to Gandhi, “My idea is not merely to teach a particular occupation to the children, but to develop the full man through teaching that occupation.” India is/was considered a

country of villages because more than half of its population resides in villages and is engaged in primary occupations. Indian villages have their own ethnicities and traditions. Villages are with various art forms and handicrafts. Varied climatic conditions have played a role in developing typical handicraft activities. For example, coastal places use coconut coir to make utility and decorative items. Similarly, the delta region has mastery over jute craft, wood work in hills and clay work in plains. There are many more resources available in Indian villages which they convert into beautiful art pieces. It is how one can be connected with the roots and transfer the heritage to the next generation. Appreciation helps any art/craft to flourish. Connecting it with productivity or saleability on the one hand keeps that art alive and on the other hand encourages entrepreneurship at the local/global level.

Relevance of Gandhi's basic education raises some questions. Do we want to build a population of manual labourers by training school children in these areas? What is the prime role of school; to impart education or to work as a skill training centre? Do we have expert teachers to impart those skills? Are young children not being deprived from independent joyful life of school, if we are making them self-reliant? Does exposure to earning and production to young children result in no interest in higher education? After some years, we would be struggling to generate employment for the children who would be coming out from these schools. Is it not unfair to children to have them work on these craft trainings at such a tender age? Who would buy these products if more finished and attractive products would be available in the market?

Gandhi thought of these issues beforehand. He further elaborated, "Every handicraft has to be taught not merely mechanically as is done today but scientifically i.e., the child should know the why and wherefore of every process. I am not writing this without some confidence, this method is effective and I got trained in spinning and sandal making on these lines with good results. This method does not exclude a knowledge of history and geography proposal, but it saves immense labour and enables a student to acquire in one year that he may take much longer to learn. this means all round economy" (Bala, 2005). Basic education established an organic correlation between the different school subjects by drawing out their implications in relation to a selected craft chosen in relation to the local environment (Kabir,1995).

During the inauguration of Wardha conference in 1937, Gandhi said: "I am convinced that the present system of primary education is not only wasteful but positively harmful" (Bala,2005). The members of the conference opined...the process of education throughout this period should centre around some form of manual productive work, that all the other abilities to be developed or trained...should, as far as possible integrally related to the central handicraft chosen with due regard to the environment of the child. A committee under the chair of Dr.Zakir Hussain took the responsibility to design an appropriate syllabus and prepared a pedagogically and ideologically elaborated draft. Some of the main principles are relevant to discuss here:

1. Productive work got a central place and recommended that children should be educated through it. A balanced approach to the "Intellectual" and practical elements of experience would educate 'the body and the mind in co-ordination.'

2. Education is beyond the moral, manner and value education, it should be instrumental to break the existing barriers of prejudices between manual and intellectual workers. It will also cultivate a...true sense of the dignity of labour and human solidarity. Economically ‘...the scheme will increase the productive capacity of our workers.’ Educationally, ‘greater consciousness and reality can be given to knowledge.’ Knowledge will thus become related to life and its various aspects will be correlated with one another.
3. ‘Craft should provide educational possibilities. Basic education means that the basic craft is to be the medium of education and not used as a vocational craft’(Gowrie,1958).

This scheme of education highlighted the dignity of labour specially the manual work. Socially divided India had /has a tendency to associate occupations with social groups (*Varna System*). Social caste or class mostly determined the extent of educational opportunities available (Zachariah & Hoffan,1985). This hierarchy in social groups has defined some occupations as prestigious and valuable and some as inferior and low. Addressing social inequality through manual productive work in school motivates children to look upon all kind of useful work as honourable and valuable. Difference between manual and mental labour could be eliminated effectively through this. Humanyun Kabir (1995) stated that “Basic Education helped to break down the repugnance to manual work and is inculcating in the minds of children a recognition of the dignity of labour.”

Gandhi’s vision of “new India” was to see children self-reliant, schools self-supporting and community (specially villages) self-sufficient. He stressed that to make economy independent and indigenous, we must therefore insist upon the children plying *charkha* for half an hour daily. Thirty thousand children and eight hundred teachers should be spinning/labouring for the country for half an hour every day. To the nation it is a gift of 1875 *maunds* (*a unit of weight*) of yarn per month. This much of production would supply one dhoti each to 5000 men. If a teacher can make child think that s/he, with five others, might be spinning enough yarn in one month for supplying one dhoti to people who were rendered naked during the flood in Madras (Gandhi,1933). School as a cottage industry not only would become self- reliant but also give empowerment and confidence to youngsters as producers /makers. Appreciation of these skills in community would work as a motivation for them. Villages could be benefitted if schools and community work together towards skill enhancement and craft and manual production. In *Young India*, he said when our children are admitted to school, they need, not slate and pencil and books, but simple village tools which they can handle freely.

India is a country of villages. Each house is a small productive unit in village, though now the scenario is changing day-by-day. People from villages are migrating to urban setups in search of livelihood and better employment opportunities. Indian villages are agrarian villages and completely dependent on climate. Nature is pushing them to cities for survival. It was envisioned by the drafting committee that a decent proportion would go for higher education. But the concern is for those who discontinue their education after basic schooling. In recognition of this belief, the programme was vocationally oriented. For Gandhi, ‘it’s a kind of insurance against unemployment’ (Prakasha, n.d.).

SCHOOL EDUCATION TODAY

“The system prevalent in India tended to become increasingly book-centred. Even in the case of children it became more and more exercise of the memory than a development of intellect, emotions and character. So much concern with books tended to divorce education from the realities of Indian life. It often done the child away from his social and cultural milieu and encouraged in him a distaste, if not contempt, for manual labour”

– (Kabir,1995)

But Basic Education made a departure from the prevalent practices and was a step towards the polytechnization of India.

From the first National policy on Education after independence to the recent development of making elementary education a fundamental right, nothing much has changed except the constitutional status. National and State policies have focussed upon quantity i.e., enrolment. Many incentive schemes such as free and compulsory education, child friendly curriculum, Mid-Day Meal, Neighbourhood schools, basic minimal infrastructure and facilities, qualified teachers, were initiated to allure the children. But despite high enrolment rate, schools have not proved to be an engaging place for many children and equally high rate of drop out is being observed. Retention is still a big concern although the no-detention policy ensured qualification up to the elementary level. Despite overwhelming efforts of the government, outcomes are far below the expectations. We cannot entirely blame parents for not sending their children to school as they do not want to lose one extra earning hand. System too has to take the responsibility. School is still not a joyful ride for many. Children do not find the place attractive enough to spend some time there. Class room transactions might be meaningful for the system or a group but there are many who are unable to find any relevance and meaning of imparted knowledge in the classroom in their lives. Gandhi said “Not only are all school activities organised in groups, but they are such as have an immediate social utility” (Kabir,1995).

Child is a social being and enters school with enriched socio-personal experiences. School gives limited scope to address and value heterogeneity in classroom. Learner-centred approach was followed in the development of textbooks (NCF2005) but the transaction is still teacher-centred. Unless the child shows his/her engagement in the school processes, we cannot ensure the expected outcomes in terms of meaningful learning. Schools in India receive heterogeneity in their classrooms. Children come from different socio-economic and religious backgrounds. End of the day each one expects something meaningful, relevant to his/ her socio-economic context but the system fails to address heterogeneity and deliver equality. In *Harijan* Gandhi also viewed that ‘unfortunately the system of education has no connection with our surroundings which, therefore, remain practically untouched by the education received by a microscopic minority of boys and girls of the nation’.

Global information has encroached major portion of the present-day school curriculum. Gandhi stressed upon the indigenous local contextual knowledge, which is most relevant for the child. These days children are more prone to technological integrations. Computer aided

teaching learning process is valued as advance methodology. Children are just a click away from the world. Now reading has become a purposive activity. E-information has changed the idea of education completely. Gandhi's vision of integrating craft and manual work with school education is a distant dream now. The State's initiative of introducing SUPW (Socially Useful and Productive Work) in school was unsuccessful to an extent.

Present Government again is reinforcing the Gandhian dream of Skilled India. An understanding of concept of manual work should be developed in the school system so that it would not be considered a mere income generating activity. Integration of craft and manual work with the school education should be a well thought exercise. Integration should be understood in the terms of relevance and meanings. Gandhi wanted to inculcate the feeling to respect the dignity of labour since childhood, but skill in hand shall raise self-confidence, esteem and worth. "Since the child does not see the purpose of the education he receives, he remains a passive and, in many cases, an unwilling subject who submits to, rather than receives, education. The product of the craft is to him a physical symbol of success and gives him a sense of achievement" (Kabir,1995). On the contrary, government is initiating Digital India campaign. Encouragement to manual skills seems challenging but to convert hundred percent populations into human capital, skill training should be introduced at school level with the younger children.

E-environment has promoted some highly sensitive scientific interventions which has direct effect on humans. Some national and international organisations are claiming to read and map the brain of a child at an early age of 4-5 years. This brain mapping through fingerprint analysis will help parents to understand the inclination/s of the child. Busy, ambitious professional parents have money but not the time to groom their children. This readymade solution is a boon for them. Why should all the resources and energy not be put into the "right" directions as claimed by these organisations? Parents with limited source of income are struggling with the expenses of education. If some money is spent initially to save larger investment later, that seems an attractive offer rather following Hit and Try approach. And for the vulnerable group 'the poor,' government always makes sure that they get voice in policies. Their number matters not the quality. Efforts taken by the schools to convince parents to get their child enrolled in school are far intense than the action taken to control drop outs.

The other side of the story must also be understood. Science has claimed and proven that mind can be read and finger prints can be analysed and we accept that unquestionably. But isn't it an exercise which we generally follow to design a machine? Nations have developed automated Robots which fulfil all the specifications and requirement of their masters. Child has a social environment with whom s/he interacts on a daily basis. How can we produce a tailor-made child unresponsive to outer and inner emotions? Do we want a talented generation, professionally trained, and who have the expertise to be the best of the workers but lesser of social and emotional beings? Education needs to be revolutionized by shifting its focus from 3R's to 3H's (Head, Heart and Hand) and "brain must be educated through hand. Those who do not train their hands go through education lacking music in their life...they are not thought to make the right choice."

EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC

Since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian education system has been affected drastically and dramatically. The effect initially started with the closing of educational institutions for a short duration and later resulted in the shifting of the education system into the online virtual mode, due to the nationwide lockdown. Which became the cause of a huge digital and gender divide and disruption in Education at all levels. Schools are struggling as to how to bring back children who have dropped out or missed school. It seems impossible, especially to those ones who were thrown into the work and the girls who were pushed to marry at an early age. These two years of the pandemic, completely deprived the children of a very large section of society of education. The intersectionality of gender and caste/class has worsened it. Perhaps even the younger children of the family may not be able to reach the school. At the same time, schools are worried even thinking that if there is a state of health emergency again, then more children will be out of mainstream education. It is more than 2 years now but still; we are not prepared with a full proof educational structure that could be accessible for one and all. This will become another emergency if it is not deeply thought through soon. Along with the pedagogies, reading materials will also have to be integrated with the present ground realities. The relevance of schools and rationality of teaching learning will have to be analysed in the present changed circumstances of the households where people were forced to go back to their native places due to close down of economic activities in the cities. Why would the child from such household want to come to school? Or why would his/her parents send him/her to school? We must have answers to these questions. Will there be a need to look at the meaning of education with its productivity or employability as well? So, should we keep talking about such education which also makes us self-reliant? Should this be considered as a critical and essential feature of the multipurpose dimensions of education? Has the upcoming education policy considered this?

NEP 2020 PERSPECTIVE

The National Education Policy 2020 in its introductory paragraphs realizes the ‘quickly changing employment landscape and global system, and recommends sensitization of teachers and parents in recognizing, identifying and fostering the unique capabilities of each child in academic and non-academic spheres to promote the holistic development (p.3&5) with the 21st century skills (p.12) as a fundamental principle.

Further the policy (p.10) talks about the ensuring universal access and afford opportunity to all children of the country to obtain quality holistic education – including vocational education. Part 4 of the policy is about the Curriculum and Pedagogy in schools and gives emphasis on vocational exposure and skills in an integrated manner(4.23).Policy focusses that learning should be holistic,integrated,enjoyable and engaging and taking this forward it talks about fun courses(a practice based curriculum) during grades 6-8(4.26 , p.16) that gives ‘a survey and hands-on experience of a sampling of important vocational crafts, such as carpentry, electric work, metal work, gardening , pottery making etc. as decided by states and local communities and as mapped by local skilling needs’. Students will participate in a 10 days bagless period and where they intern with the local vocational experts. Such summer

trainings will be provided up to class 12. Vocational courses through online mode will also be introduced to introduce variety of experts to children. To promote local knowledge and professions schools will be encouraged to identify local experts (master instructor) in skills and knowledge (5.6, p.21).

NEP stresses upon the Reimagining Vocational Education (16.1, p.43) as it is perceived to be inferior to mainstream education which affects the choices of students. There is a complete lack of vertical mobility. Students end up with a grasp of low skills. NEP 20 critically examines the current status of vocational education at school and university level and underlines the urgency of the need to hasten the spread of it. Policy aims to overcome the social status hierarchy associated with vocational education and requires integration of vocational education programme into mainstream in all education institutions in a phased manner (p.44). 'It will ensure that every child learns at least one vocation and is exposed to several more. This would lead to emphasising the dignity of labour and importance of various vocations involving Indian arts and artisanship'.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

Almost after 90 years, we are again talking about the Gandhian vision of self-reliant school education with skill integration. Exposure to various Skills /vocation training will help the child to see where his/her interest lies.

In the situation we all are going through, there is a need to make education employable but there should not be any kind of compromise with basic education in this haste. The vision is very well expressed in the New Education policy that India would like to ensure its participation in the upcoming 30 years with the skilled youth in the global economy which is why attention is also being paid to vocational education. NEP2020 critically analyses the drawbacks of the efforts taken by earlier policies and programmes in these directions and came out with the strong recommendations to bridge the disparities between academic and vocational courses. Apart from that at the state and local levels resources will be identified to introduce the indigenous art and craft forms to children. Now it has to be seen how it will be implemented so that teachers, students, and parents show their curiosities in these courses.

"I admit that my proposal is novel. But novelty is no crime. I admit that it has not much, experience behind it. But what experience my associates and I have encouraged me to think that the plan, if worked faithfully, will succeed. The nation can lose nothing by trying the experiment even if it fails. And the gain will be immense if the experiment succeeds even partially."

– (Gandhi in *Towards New Education*).

NEP 2020 has a detailed programme to nurture this grand Gandhian vision.

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