CHAPTER IV

GANDHIJI'S SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION

By education I mean the way in which each person becomes aware of himself and his place in the world at large, and learns how best to conduct himself in it and to contribute to it.

Harold Taylor

The above quote of Harold Taylor could very well explain the effort made by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa to restore the dignity and worth of an individual person. The inhabitants of South Africa, specially the Indians who came to settle there, did not have a fair treatment. This chapter would show how Gandhiji's experience in educating the people was unique of its kind in that he evolved a philosophy of education through practising a theory of education which was worthy of investigation, as seen in the previous chapter. He managed to make the person realize himself and his environment so that, as a person, he could conduct himself properly and contribute to the enrichment of one and all in society.

The Urge to serve and educate

It could very well be said that perhaps education would not have interested Gandhiji so much had he remained an ordinary lawyer, practising only what he learned in London, after spending less than four years in that part of the United Kingdom.

We know for sure that he returned to India in 1891 and established a law practice in Bombay. But, unfortunately, this practice failed to provide Gandhiji with a descent and reasonable living. In
1893, with the help of his elder brother, an attorney-at-law by profession, and, at the request of a prominent Indian resident in Durban, he went to South Africa to assist in a matter of litigation.

His law practice in South Africa was out of the ordinary. Wherever he went he united opposition parties. It can be said that his urge to serve and educate the people was slowly coming out. While referring to his law practice he observed:

I had learned the true practice of law. I had learned to find out the better side of human nature and to enter man's hearts. I realized that the true function of a lawyer was to unite parties driven asunder.

Unlike other lawyers, he actually delved into the secrets of human heart with a view to understanding all its varied strings, namely, human psychology.

As there was a large number of Indian nationals who had already settled in South Africa, he did not find it difficult to adapt himself to his new environment. History has it that, with the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, in 1834, South Africa and many other British Colonies, including Mauritius, having faced a labour shortage, had to turn to that great reservoir of manpower, India, and a vast program for the importation of indentured labour was commenced. The British government, instead of being grateful to those South African Indians for their labour, subjected them to an inhumane treatment. Their history was a sad one. It was 'a case study in moral bankruptcy and imperial futility'. Gandhi threw himself, heart and soul, into the midst of their struggle for civil liberties and human rights. He boldly declared:
I thus made an intimate study of the hard condition of the Indian settlers, not only by reading and hearing about it, but by personal experience. I saw that South Africa was no country for a self-respecting Indian, and my mind became more and more occupied with the question as to how this state of things might be improved.

Little did Gandhiji know that he would spend two decades of his life in South Africa to serve and educate the unfortunate and the down-trodden, except for two short interruptions: first, to get his family with him and second, to familiarize the Indian Parliament with the inhumane treatment of overseas Indians. Come what may, it was a hard decision that he took when he exclaimed:

Thus God laid the foundations of my life in South Africa and sowed the seed of the fight for national self-respect.

During the time he stayed in South Africa he quickly realized that education could be the pivotal activity and the most potent instrument of reform but, unfortunately, it had not been used in the proper way. 'The only training that Indian children received in South Africa was in the three R's', he said. This sort of education could not bring an integrated personality but could only make one become a slave to the system or a slave to one's master. Opportunity was not given to anyone to develop the spirit so as to acquire prestige and respect in society. Every activity in the school, according to Gandhiji, ought to have a spiritual foundation, failing which all training would be useless. He clearly made the point when he once declared:
To develop the spirit is to build character and to enable one to work towards a knowledge of God and self-realization. And I held this was an essential part of the training.

For Gandhiji, the then existing system of education in South Africa was ineffective because it was dehumanizing the people. They were trained only to be slaves to their masters without becoming integrated, autonomous and creative persons. He therefore decided to find out the true system that would take care of the culture of the spirit or the culture of the heart. In a letter addressed to Shri Surendra Singh of the Punjab Civil Secretariat, he revealed his ideas about the true function of education:

Education liberates us, frees us from bondage, helps us to shine, adds to the country's wealth, enriches character; our boys and girls become smart and intelligent thereby.

How could this true function of education be realized when the school buildings themselves were in desperate conditions and the children hardly had any support? In an article entitled 'The Indian question in South Africa', he also clearly pointed out:

The buildings, as a rule, are of the most primitive type - a few corrugated iron sheets and a few planks of wood composing the material. They are wretchedly constructed, and, in country places, are devoid even of flooring, mother earth serving the purpose. In one instance a stable had been turned into a school.
And referring to the children, he did point out that they hardly received from the Government any grant for an adequate support. He even observed that there was a glaring injustice being done to the children in that

If there is a parent ready to disown his Indian Nationality, he can send his child to the public schools .... A child born of prostitution, where one parent is European is admissible. It is the full-blooded Indian alone who has the ban of excommunication stamped upon him.

In view of the difficult and pitiful conditions prevailing at that time, Gandhiji's urge to serve and educate slowly materialized. He left no stone unturned to start his work which was based on the spiritual disciplines he learnt from his earlier childhood and other later experiences.

The Phoenix Settlement

With the assistance of numerous friends, especially Albert West and Henry Polak, Gandhiji acquired one hundred acres of land at Phoenix where he established an Ashram called Phoenix settlement. All his staunch followers as well as his students came to live and work there. 'A' is a Hindi verb meaning 'come' and 'shram' means 'labour'. The entire word therefore carries the idea of a group of people who come to labour together. Gilbert Highet in his book The art of teaching has beautifully described an Ashram as 'a community dedicated to living with the master,' and where, of course, self-activity and character-building reigned supreme. In fact it was an ancient Indian ideal when a guru could influence the conduct of his students through worthwhile activities performed in a spirit of Truth, Love and Non-violence.
Gandhiji himself observed:

I believe in the ancient idea of teachers teaching for the love of it and receiving the barest maintenance. Roman Catholics have retained that idea and they are responsible for the best educational institutions in the world. The rishis (sages and seers) of old did even better. They made their pupils members of their families.\(^{14}\)

The view put forward by Gandhiji is not far-fetched. A child can learn best in a place where he feels at home, where the teacher teaches with love, and when the teachings do not only cultivate the mind but also meet one's feelings and emotions. In an Ashram, a person actually feels at home. The love, the warmth and the affection which he gets makes him live a fully integrated life. He also learns the best that is taught. Today we think that a school is a better place to learn but there is a widespread criticism that schools in general are not delivering the goods. Men like Paul Goodman, in his *Compulsory Miseducation*, Ivan Illich, in his *Deschooling Society*, Everett Reiner, in his *School is Dead* and Paulo Freire, in his *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, tell us that the schools are miseducating the people, as dehumanization is being practised by ignoring completely the human factor in education which, in other words, means that the educational system is not taking care of the spiritual element.

The school that was opened at the Phoenix settlement was modelled after the home. Dignity of labour and self-respect were given pride of place. Drawing water, splitting firewood, cleaning, sanitary service, cooking, washing, agriculture, dairying, weaving, carpentry, tanning and the like were among the worthwhile activities which proved beyond doubt
that the first lesson given was that of service, self-reliance and selfless action. Both intellectual development and spiritual growth were thus included in the physical labour and Gandhiji himself wrote:

If intellectual progress spells understanding and discrimination, there is adequate provision for it in the Ashram... Everything was done intelligently, enthusiastically and for the love of God.16

As a matter of fact, all workers and students at the settlement were required to follow the practice of plain living and high thinking. Gandhiji would often, after school hours, discuss with the children an important event or a great man or a great book while working in the garden or in the kitchen.17 And this approach of his helped considerably the building of character which he used to call 'spiritual training.'

Gandhiji did not lose time to find out that the best school where worthwhile knowledge, relevant skills and healthy attitudes could be transmitted should be modelled after the home. 'The education that children imbibe in a well-ordered household is impossible to obtain in hostels,' he said. What he meant was that parents were the first teachers and that they had to be very careful in their teachings because children would learn from them by precept and example. Speaking from his personal experience, he observed:

Children inherit the qualities of the parents, no less than their physical features. Environment does play an important part, but the original capital on which a child starts his life is inherited from its ancestors.19
In fact, Gandhiji wanted to draw the attention of the parents towards the education of their children, mindful of the fact that teachers were scarce. From a report of the Indian Immigrant School Board of 1892-93 it was found that, when Gandhiji was in South Africa, there was actually a scarcity of teachers:

Teachers for Indian schools,
ever easy to find, were usually from South India or Mauritius, although a few student teachers from Natal were also employed.

In our system of education, which we have copied from the British, we have the tendency of being a Calvinist in that we think that children are bad by nature and, therefore, they should be tortured and punished. Violence or rudeness should be used, according to Gandhiji, neither for the reformation nor for the transformation of character. When he himself had to face 'the moral fall of two inmates of the Ashram', he was at first very furious but he then realized that any situation, problem or crisis should be faced with calmness and patience. He investigated into the matter, informed the wrong-doers of their guilt and took to fasting. That was an experiment unique of its kind and it gave wonderful results, as reported by Gandhiji himself:

My penance pained everybody, but it cleared the atmosphere. Everyone came to realize what a terrible thing it was to be sinful, and the bond that bound me to the boys and girls became stronger and truer."

Some educators might argue that to act like Gandhiji would be hard for a teacher and this could not be the practical way of dealing with the problems of discipline or punishment in the classroom. It could be
said that there should be then different kinds of punishment for different kinds of pupils, for, psychologically speaking, no two students are alike. Under these circumstances, Gandhiji found it very practical and wise to do the penance himself and, by doing so, he could influence the conduct of his pupils in a positive way. He explained the clue to his approach thus:

It is not my purpose to make out from these incidents that it is the duty of a teacher to resort to fasting whenever there is a delinquency on the part of his pupils. I hold, however, that some occasions call for this drastic remedy. But it presupposes clearness of vision and spiritual fitness.

Gandhiji’s ideas were quite clear. He wanted the teacher to be as sincere as a father or a mother vis-à-vis his or her children. He wanted true love and affection between teacher and pupil so that the latter could feel the sadness or the guilt when the former could be in penance. And this could be the reason why Gandhiji gave us a word of caution when he stated:

Where there is no true love between the teacher and the pupil, where the pupil’s delinquency has not touched the very being of the teacher and where the pupils have no respect for the teacher, fasting is out of place and may even be harmful.

The fact remains that, according to Gandhiji, a teacher should always do his duties with dedication, sincerity, love and affection. Only then that most of his students would respect him and when he would do something he would be successful in his endeavour. This
This foundation stone, mainly spiritual in nature, was laid at the Phoenix settlement not au petit bonheur but bona fide and it was 'the first of several centers at which Gandhi's disciples and co-workers gathered together to live an austere and strenuous life devoted to some form of work or activity of which Gandhi approved.' In fact, Gandhi worked hard on what he believed to be true and, subsequently, it was at the Tolstoy Farm that he seized the golden opportunity to carry on his work with a view to evolving a philosophy of education closely connected to his philosophy of life based on practical and decent living.

The Tolstoy Farm

The Ashram at Tolstoy Farm, which Gandhi named in honour of Alexi Leo Tolstoy, whose philosophy of life he admired, was larger than that of Phoenix. It was established by the help of several friends, specially Hermann Kallenbach, a rich but generous friend. Many followers flocked together when they came to know Gandhi's good intention. 'The work before us', Gandhi said, 'was to make the farm a busy hive of industry, thus to save money and, in the end, to make the families self-supporting.' As at the Phoenix settlement, dignity of labour, self-restraint and self-reliance were given top priority. 'The weak become strong on Tolstoy Farm and labour proved to be a tonic for all.' In fact, right from the start, Gandhi made the farm an actual spiritual centre of activity and learning. He did not prove to be an armchair theorist but a practical idealist who practised what he preached through worthwhile and selfless activities.

Being concerned with education, he quickly set up a school at the Farm. 'As the farm grew', he said, 'it was found necessary to make some provisions for the education of its boys and girls.' With him
there was neither communalism nor favouritism. Everyone was treated
equally as a human being. There was no low or high caste and no
sectarianism of any sort. Among his pupils there were Hindus, Muslims,
Parsis and Christians \(^{29}\) and he taught them the best of all knowledge
which could be useful, the best of all skills which could be relevant,
and the best of all attitudes which could be humane and healthy, stressing
all the time the three-fold path of Truth, Love and Non-violence. He
supplemented his teaching by telling or reading stories with a spiritual
background, by saying prayers of a universal nature and by singing
devotional songs in European as well as in Indian languages. He declared
that such an approach in the principles of teaching would undoubtedly save
children from catching vices and bad habits and would show them how
'to view one another's religious and customs with a large-hearted charity'. \(^{30}\)
Children would thus learn how 'to live together like blood-brothers',
while imbibing 'the lessons of mutual service, courtesy and industry'. \(^{31}\)

Besides children of different denominations, Gandhiji had to deal
with pupils of different ages and of both sexes. With the help of
Kallenbach and a few student-teachers, whom he trained and educated,
Gandhiji had great hope. 'A teacher hardly had to teach the kind of
heterogeneous class that fell to my lot', \(^{32}\) he said. In fact, he had
in his class

pupils of all ages and both sexes,
from boys and girls of about 7
years of age to young men of 20
and young girls of 12 and 13 years
old. \(^{33}\)

While experimenting with his heterogeneous group of pupils Gandhiji
gave us a very good piece of advice. He found out that good and bad
students could be taught together and that co-education was a good thing.
By doing so, they could learn from one another and would be trained, disciplined and educated in the right direction. He did not even want his own children to be taught separately as this, he said, could put a 'sense of superiority into their heads'\(^{34}\), which, in the long run, could load them astray. He did not hesitate therefore to conclude that:

"Children wrapped up in cottonwool are not always proof against all temptation or contamination. It is true, however, that when boys and girls of all kinds of upbringing are kept and taught together, the parents and the teachers are put to the severest test."\(^{35}\)

He also insisted that children would learn much more from their teacher than from textbooks and these were his own words:

"I did not find it all necessary to load the boys with quantities of books. I have always felt that the true textbook for the pupil is his teacher."\(^{36}\)

Modern educators to-day would be surprised to note how Gandhiji handled those young boys and girls in order to educate them fully, that is, to develop them physically, intellectually and spiritually. He divided them into groups, according to their intellectual abilities, only when he had to impart 'some general knowledge of history and geography and, in some cases, of arithmetic.'\(^{37}\) In other study areas, he always brought them together into mutual contact with a view to inculcating in them a spirit of co-operation and participation through the three-fold lesson of Truth, Love and Non-violence. He once clearly said:
I had always given the first place to the culture of the heart or the building of character and as I felt confident that moral training could be given to all alike, no matter how different their ages and their upbringing, I decided to live amongst them all the twenty-four hours of the day as their father. I regarded character building as the proper foundation for their education and, if the foundation was firmly laid, I was sure that the children could learn all the other things themselves or with the assistance of friends.

Regarding the education of the three faculties: physical, intellectual and spiritual, he had a definite philosophy which could serve as a guiding light to our modern educators, specially when they are seriously inclined to give an integrated personality to their pupils. In this respect, he rightly observed:

We must provide for the development of all the three: the body, the mind and the soul; whichever of these remains undeveloped will cause trouble in the future, and not only that, it will also have a very adverse affect on society. Even to-day we are suffering from the ill effects of an improperly devised education.

It is to be noted that Gandhiji's view was not Utopian. It was very practical. We are, in fact, suffering not from the materiaлистic world but from a lack of spiritual control over our material benefits. Technology has progressed considerably but spirituality has not. In order that spiritual training or character building could be put into practice, his personal experience indicated that the teacher should 'be mindful of his p's and q's whether he was in the midst of his boys or not'. He further believed that a teacher
situated miles away, could affect the spirit of his students. 'It would be idle for me, if I were a liar, to teach boys to tell the truth.'

He also observed that 'a cowardly teacher would never succeed in making his boys valiant, and a stranger to self-restraint could never teach his pupils the value of self-restraint.' In short, he advised that teachers, according to his own personal experience, should value good conduct in that the teaching should be done both by precept and example. I would here support Gandhiji's view because, even in a market place, a child could be there watching his teachers buying vegetables and seeing whether they were not cheating the merchant by pushing in a few extra potatoes in their basket, specially when the latter could be busy counting his money or doing other things.

The enriched experience par excellence

The experience in education in South Africa which Gandhiji had was the enriched experience par excellence. It was something which was practical in its core and no one could pretend that it was an experience done without dedication and sincerity.

On the whole, whatever could help a person to be integrated and could also stand the test of good conduct by lifting the morals of the people both at the Phoenix Settlement and at the Tolstoy Farm was considered to be right education for Gandhiji.

Education, after all, could be good or bad depending on the teachers who would plan it and carry it on enthusiastically. Gandhiji did more than that. He planned it and carried it on not only enthusiastically but also with engagement, dedication and sincerity. All what he did
and experienced was based on a spiritual foundation. And I for one would say whatever difficulties we have in life and education boil down to a moral or spiritual problem, and Gandhiji was right in saying that if educators ignore the spiritual training, which is an important part of education, society is bound to suffer from a sort of mis-education.
References to Chapter IV


4. Robert A. Huttenback, Ibid., p 333


11. M.K. Gandhi, Ibid., Vol III., p 83


