CHAPTER V

GANDHIJI’S INDIAN EXPERIMENT IN EDUCATION

Education must tell us in what way to treat the body, the mind and the soul; in what way to manage our affairs; in what way to bring up our family; in what way to behave as a citizen; in what way to utilize those sources of happiness which nature supplies; how to use all faculties to the greatest advantage to ourselves and others.

Herbert Spencer

Gandhiji returned to his native land, India, in 1914. He was then the experienced, knowledgeable and wise man, aged 45. Unlike many intellectuals of his age, he decided to put his experience into full practical use so as to educate the masses and at the same time to liberate Mother India, Bharat Mata, from foreign rule. His experiment in education, as we would see, came to prove that when philosophy was properly applied to life a philosophy of education was bound to evolve that could help to raise the quality of life. This chapter therefore would show how Gandhiji experimented with education and how, through his selfless dedicated work, the modern man of our technological age could no longer dismiss the ideas expressed above by Herbert Spencer as being Utopian, and which Gandhiji made practical and realistic.

The stronger urge to serve and educate

Gandhiji's staunch followers at Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm had already arrived when he landed. Rabindranath Tagore, one of the re-generators of India, accommodated them all in his college campus at Shantiniketan. 'Shanti' means 'peace' and 'niketan' means 'abode'.

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The place was really an abode of peace and it was there that Gandhiji met both eastern and western scholars in order to discuss the new experiment in education, Nai Talim, which he had in mind. He argued that the backwardness of the Indian people was due to the two-century old British imperialistic regime during which nothing really solid was done but, on the contrary, as stated by Palme Dutt:

There was more plundering and conquering, dividing and ruling than planning and directing or educating and instructing.¹

No doubt, it could not be said that the Indians learnt nothing from the British but it could be argued that as far as spirituality or morality was concerned they learnt practically nothing. In favour of this argument, Gandhiji himself did not hesitate to state:

Under the British aegis we have learnt much, but it is my firm belief that there is little to gain from Britain in intrinsic morality, that if we are not careful, we shall introduce all the vices that she has been a pray to owing to the disease of materialism.²

Gandhiji therefore got the stronger urge to serve and educate by using his past experiences. Thus he tried to better the conditions of the Indian people whose education, according to him, was not the right kind of education that was given. He thought of the British system of education as one which was implanted by force on the Indian soil. It was Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay's minute of February 2nd, 1835 that heralded the birth of such a system³ on a land which was steeped from ancient times in oriental learning and culture. From that date onward, the Indian system was on the decline to the extent of bringing ignorance, illiteracy and bondage to the people whose 80 percent of the population
were villagers. Even to-day, to see real India one should visit her villages.

His strong urge to serve and educate grew stronger still when he read Macaulay's *Life and Letters* in which, *inter alia*, the latter said:

Our English schools are flourishing wonderfully. No Hindoo who has received an English education ever remains sincerely attached to his religion.⁴

He readily saw that the trick of educating the Indian people was to make them serve their masters, just as it was done in South Africa where indentured labour was another form of semi-slavery. His reaction was spontaneous when he observed:

I do not know whether Macaulay's dream that English-educated India would abandon its religious belief has been realized. But we know too he had another dream, namely, to supply through English-educated India clerks and the like for the English rulers. That dream has been realized beyond all expectations.⁵

Since education, misused or misdirected, could do more harm than good to the people, it was crystal clear in the mind of Gandhiji that it was extremely necessary for him to tour the country to gather first-hand information and at the same time to remedy the malady of a sick society. The tours he made revealed that there were three main defects in the British system of education.

The first defect was that the system catered only for intellectual development at the expense of physical and spiritual development in that it ignored the culture of the heart and the hand by confining itself simply to the head.⁶ It was purely meant, in other words, to train the people to become clerks and petty officers in order to reinforce the British bureaucratic machine of administration through the two-fold policy of 'divide and
rule' and 'domination'. Gandhiji was pained to observe that, after getting an English education, young people were not willing to promote their traditional skills but gave them up as something inferior, considering it simply honourable to get a clerical post from the point of view of Jati(caste) and Karma(action), thus becoming more deeply entangled in slavery.

The second defect was that the implantation of a foreign culture in India, a land rich in its tradition and customs, caused disorder, division, confusion and conflict in the life of the people because what people learnt in school was different from the actual life they lived. And Gandhiji rightly put it when he stated:

Since life at school is the exact opposite of the life at home, the instruction imparted through text-books is like the spurious teachings of those who are competent only at preaching not practising.

The third defect was that the medium of instruction was English, a foreign language which was a burden to the people. According to Gandhiji, such a medium could not but enslave the mind of the learner and destroy growth and development. In response to a question put by someone interested in the education of the young, Gandhiji replied:

The medium of instruction being English, the burden on the students' brain has doubled. It has destroyed their power of imagination - their power to create and invent.

All these defects were quite justified. An education, properly devised and planned, should, by all means, produce integrated persons whose intellectual, physical and spiritual faculties could work fully and harmoniously. It should not create any dichotomy between life at school and life at home.
or in the country. Learning should take place both by precept and example. One could not spend one's entire time in learning the pronunciation and the idiom of a foreign language and, even after learning it, that language could not be used to touch the hearts of the downtrodden masses. Again, Gandhiji was right when he once argued that an education could not be national which 'takes no count of the starving millions of India' and which 'devises no means for their relief'.

The stronger urge to serve and educate became really apparent when he made the following statement, without the shadow of any doubt:

Government contact with the villages ends with the collection of revenue. Our contact with them begins with their service through the spinning wheel. The spinning wheel is the centre of that service.

The Sabarmati experiment

With the firm belief that spiritual training, that is, character building coupled with intellectual and physical training should be the essence of a well balanced education, Gandhiji established a meaningful and worthwhile centre of learning on the banks of the Sabarmati river on May 25th, 1925. He called it Satyagraha (truth-grasping) Ashram, the main object of which was:

Its members should qualify themselves for, and make a constant endeavour towards the service of the country, not inconsistent with the universal welfare.

Simply acquiring knowledge could be an ornament to make people believe that one is educated. A truly educated man is, in fact, someone who possesses healthy attitudes coupled with relevant skills meant to promote the common welfare of one and all, with enough control over himself and his environment. It was positive that with this view in mind
Gandhiji wished spiritual training or character-building to be one of the main aims in education. He therefore established certain rules of conduct for the ashramites so that they could work without selfish motives, abiding by the principle of Nishakama Karma (selfless dedicated action). Considering humility as being an essential characteristic of an educated person, he said that 'the true connotation of humility is self-effacement' and this 'self-effacement is moksha (liberation)' . Consequently, he wanted to bring home to the ashramites that humility could not come by itself but through the observance of certain principles while at work and these principles were non-stealing, non-possession, chastity, fearlessness, control, removal of untouchability and toleration. Among the activities he spelled out were worship, saninary service, sacrificial spinning, wearing, dyeing, printing, agriculture, dairy and tannery.

Gandhiji did not want to give an incomplete education devoid of either spiritual growth or intellectual or physical development which could hinder character building as well as national reconstruction. About the complete education he gave at the ashram, he said:

An attempt is made to impart such education as is conducive to national welfare. In order that spiritual, intellectual and physical development may proceed side by side, an atmosphere of industry has been created, and letters are not given more than their due importance. Character-building is attended to in the smallest detail.

As a matter of fact, Gandhiji's experiment was not confined solely to the ashramites. The ashram was simply the headquarter or the resource-centre. Wishing to create a set of men and women who could devote themselves to the service of the entire nation and liberate their motherland from foreign rule, he was quick to open schools in the villages affiliated to the ashram.
He was helped by his South African followers and many Indian friends who came to join him. He begged the educators to teach by precept and example and, when transmitting knowledge, he asked them to do it mainly through the mother-tongue and, furthermore, to concentrate on manual training through a handicraft relevant to the village. His main motto was *Sa Vidya Ya Vimuktaya*, that is, 'Knowledge is that which liberates' - a motto which he cherished in all his experiments with education. He boldly stated:

> The ancient aphorism, 'Education is that which liberates' is as true today as it was before. Education here does not mean mere spiritual knowledge nor does liberation signify only spiritual liberation after death. Knowledge includes all training that is useful for the service of mankind and liberation means freedom from all manner of servitude even in the present life.

To put people on their guard, he explained that there were two types of servitude, one could be a 'domination from outside' whereas the other could be one's own psychological break up due to 'one's own artificial needs'. His movement was therefore one of *Satyagraha* (truth-grasping) meant to make people conscious of their deeds with a view to liberating them from both types of servitude. What he wanted was service in lieu of servitude, a service devoid of selfish motives. Such a movement directed from the *Ashram* at *Sabarmati* gathered so much momentum that a British official warned him that what he was doing was a threat to the government. In his reply, he did not hesitate to state:

> This was no threat. It was educating the people. It is my duty to place before the people all the legitimate remedies for grievances. A nation that wants to come into its own ought to know all the ways and means to freedom. Usually they include violence
The Champaran experiment

From the main headquarters at Saharanpur, Gandhiji very ably influenced the conduct of life in many places. Champaran was one of those districts in Bihar where, out of ignorance, the people practised a strange system called tinkathia in which the tenants were bound by law to plant three out of twenty parts of their land with indigo for the benefit of their landlords. He fought the law and attacked the root cause by starting to educate the people. By education he did not mean to refer merely to a set of theories for justifying the use of those techniques but a set of values and ideals embodied and expressed in the purpose for which knowledge was imparted. And what he did was remarkable. He made an appeal to able volunteer teachers and quickly opened experimental schools in six villages of the Champaran district. "As far as possible we placed", he said, "each school in charge of one man and one woman" and "these volunteers had to look after medical relief and sanitation".

The experimental schools were quite satisfactory because whatever was done as worthwhile activities was based upon the needs of the people whose conditions were thoroughly studied by Gandhiji. Besides imparting know-how and know-that to develop their physical and intellectual skills, know-self was also stressed in that the teachers were asked to teach cleanliness and good manners, as these requirements were completely ignored although they were essential for the development of the spirit or character of a person. Medi-care and other sanitary and health education were also given in order that knowledge could be made useful in every department of their lives. Such an experiment proved to be a success, as Gandhiji himself observed:
The volunteers with their schools, sanitation work and medical relief gained the confidence and respect of the village folk and were able to bring good influence to bear upon them.23

Gandhiji's experiment was, in truth, not an ordinary one. Through his tremendous work he made the teachers as well as the villagers realize that schools, in addition to being places for learning, could also be used as community centres for planning, motivating, organizing and controlling proposed with a view to initiating people into worthwhile and useful activities so that they could lead good and dignified lives for the uplift and welfare of one and all. That society is not a good one where only one man would shine. That is a good society where everyone could help one another and shine together. Such a principle, as viewed by Gandhiji, could very well explain the actual purpose of education for the sake of both Self and God realization referred to in our earlier discussion.

In fact, what Gandhiji wanted to bring home to the people was quite down-to-earth. Man, being a complex creature, could not live a material life only. As a person, he should also look inwardly so as to be transformed from within in order to supplement materialism with spirituality. After all, modification of behaviour could not be something mechanical. Man, I would argue, is neither a robot nor an animal. Animals are trained but people should be educated and that was the great task of Gandhiji. Through his practical way of life, he was convinced that any work of a permanent nature was impossible without proper village education,24 as most of the people of India lived in the villages.

Gandhiji worked hard to right the wrong. The tinkathia system was thus abolished and with it the planters' raj (rule) came to an end.25 He wanted to see a true democratic state. Influenced by his dedicated
selfless service to the people, the British government, in April 1939, was forced to start thirty basic schools along the lines indicated by him. Gone were the days when only the 'three' R's were taught and the community's needs were overlooked or ignored. 'Three' was a sign of accomplishment, fulfilment and progress when quality education which included the three H's became the order of the day. As we know very well that vices are caught whereas virtues are taught, Gandhiji left no stone unturned to couple secular education with spiritual education where love of work, cooperation, team-spirit, non-violence, trust and character-building were encouraged to the maximum. He wanted, by all means, not to separate the spiritual from the material because he believed that it was in this separation that domination and slavery could raise their ugly heads.

The Sewagram Experiment

Very few people could be as busy as Gandhiji and still be interested in the education of the masses. Two years after his participation in the London Round Table Conference of 1931, he settled at Wardha, a small place in Segaon, which he called Sewagram meaning 'a village of service'. It was here that he established another Ashram and became involved in several religio-cultural and socio-economic activities while, at the same time, he formulated his educational philosophy. Who would have believed that when he was in London he would find time to give an interview to the Teacher's World? And the points he made were very forceful in that they constituted the bases of his line of action, namely:

1. the gospel of love as the sole compulsion and directing force in the training of children.
2. the doctrine of forgiveness.
3. the meaning of true education which should result not in the lust for material power but in spiritual force.
With the burning desire to implement what he had in mind, he lost no time to request teachers and students all over India to boycott government schools and colleges which, according to him, were miseducating the people. The boycott took the form of non-cooperation with evil. The non-cooperator, he advised, had to accept three main conditions: peace, self-control and sacrifice (yajna). Thousands of people responded to help open national schools and colleges in various parts of the country. When, in 1937, the Indian National Congress, emerging as the strongest elected party, had to face financial problems in promoting compulsory primary education, he stepped in with the idea of starting self-supporting schools and colleges through a relevant handicraft to raise the quality of education. Some educators supported his view but others did not. No doubt there was a great controversy in the land but finally an All India National Educational Conference was convened on October 22, 1937 with eminent educators in attendance. Gandhiji clearly explained to all those present that the British system of education was not only wasteful but also harmful. He advocated a craft-centred education and argued that craft and education could not be separated from each other. His scheme came to be known as Nai Talim or New Education or, more popularly called, the Wardha scheme of Education or Basic Education. From the psychological point of view the main object of his scheme was to develop the physical, intellectual and spiritual faculties of children through the medium of a handicraft. In other words, he wanted his country to be economically sound through the expansion of village industries but without ignoring the fact that his people should preserve their spiritual or moral fibre. He clearly stated:
We can teach our children to make clay toys that are to be destroyed afterwards. That, too, will develop their intellect. But it will neglect a very important moral principle, viz, that human labour and material should never be used in a wasteful and unproductive way.30

While encouraging the spiritual or moral development of the people, his scheme encouraged dedication, participation, team-spirit, cooperation, sharing, self-respect, consideration for others, dignity of labour and love of work considered as values that would promote social living which, in his view, should be of a good moral standard, failing which man could fall at the level of the beast and start challenging the three-fold path of Truth, Love and Non-violence. Once he also explained that

The emphasis laid on the principle of spending every minute of one’s life usefully is the best education for citizenship and incidently makes basic education self-sufficient.31

The Sewanram experiment was something both worthwhile and meaningful. It could be argued that what Gandhiji formulated was based on actual facts observed and tested by him through selfless dedicated work, unlike most philosophers of education who were mere theorists in the true sense of the word. To be precise, the propositions he formulated were as follows:32

1. That the mother-tongue should be the medium of instruction.

2. That compulsory education should be extended to seven years.

3. That physical, intellectual and spiritual training should be interrelated.

4. That vocational training should serve a dual purpose: enabling the pupil to yield products of value and at the same time to develop his entire personality.
5. That all subjects to be taught, as far as possible, through a handicraft or, in other words, through a profit-yielding vocation.

6. That higher education to be left to private enterprise and for meeting national requirements whether in the various industries, technical arts, belles-lettres or fine arts.

7. That state universities to be purely examining bodies, looking after the whole field of education by preparing and approving courses of studies of all schools in general.

8. That no private school to be run without the previous sanction of the state universities.

The educational conference was quite useful. It had its raison d'être in that it passed meaningful resolutions and they were as follows:

1. That free and compulsory education to be provided for seven years on a nation-wide scale.

2. That the medium of instruction should be the mother-tongue.

3. That the process of education to centre around some form of manual and productive work and all other abilities to be developed or training to be given should be integrally related to the central handicraft chosen with due regard to the environment of the child.

4. That the system of education should gradually cover the remuneration of teachers.

It is often said that resolutions are simply passed but never implemented. In this particular case a committee of leading educationists and educators, under the chairmanship of Dr Zakir Hussain, was appointed to prepare a planned syllabus based on those resolutions. While thanking all the members of the conference Gandhiji could not help saying that 'God did
not create us to eat, drink and be merry but to earn our bread with the sweat of our brow." And he also forcefully added that 'If our own people acted on the square, there would be no slaves but perfect artisans produced from the schools.'

As it was argued earlier, the conference was not simply a show but something meaningful. After a thorough examination of the problems of education, the committee called for a Hindustani Talimi Samiti which submitted its report on December 2, 1937, and the salient recommendations of which could be summarized thus:

1. There should be free compulsory education.
2. Craft should become the centre of education.
3. There should be a self-supporting aspect of the scheme.
4. Mother-tongue should be the medium of instruction.
5. Education should be based on the cult of love and non-violence.
6. Education should have an ideal of citizenship.
7. Education should be based on the ideal of cooperative community.

Any committee could make wonderful recommendations but the recommendations could be made realistic only if they could be arranged in the form of structured and established knowledge. Fortunately this was done and the curriculum was a workable one in that the following disciplines were mentioned as worthwhile knowledge:

- A basic craft
- The mother-tongue
- Mathematics
- Social studies
The evolution of Gandhiji's educational thought backed by his philosophy of life was so scientific and systematic that not only the people but also the government gave it due importance. In a report which appeared in The Times of India on March 13, 1950, two years after Gandhiji's assassination, the Chief Minister of Bombay made the remark that the proper organization of basic education was linked with the tougher problems of social reconstruction as well as moral and intellectual re-orientation in the country. To-day we hear of de-schooling society by men like Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich and Everett Reimer. Gandhiji was aware of the evils of schooling but what he wished was to re-school society. In 1956, the Government of India, through its Ministry of Education, published a booklet on the concept of basic education in which, inter alia, one could read the following:

The basic scheme envisions a close integration between the schools and the community so as to make education as well as the children more social-minded and co-operative. It endeavours to achieve this, firstly, by organizing the school itself as a living and functioning community - with its social and cultural programmes and other activities - and secondly, by encouraging students to participate in the life around the school and in organizing various types of social service to the local community.

In our modern world to-day, we have the tendency to talk of self-realization, self-help, self-reliance and so forth. The booklet clearly put emphasis on self-government as a very important feature of the scheme, especially in the training for responsibility and for a democratic way of life. The argument was quite straightforward when it
was pointed out that the scheme could help to cultivate, nurture and foster in the students the 'qualities of self-reliance, cooperation and respect for dignity of labour', which could be 'a vital factor in the creation of a dynamic social order'.\textsuperscript{41} It can be argued here that there could not be any accomplishment, achievement and fulfilment in any walk of life without moral and spiritual values as guidelines towards a decent, orderly, productive and efficient living. Gandhiji always had this aim in view and he had sincerely and forcefully predicted that

My plan to impart primary education through the medium of village handi-crafts, like spinning and carding is thus conceived as the spearhead of a silent social revolution fraught with the most far-reaching consequences. It will provide a healthy and moral basis of relationship between the city and the village, and thus go on a long way towards eradicating some of the worst evils of the present social insecurity and poisoned relationship between the classes.\textsuperscript{42}

With this idea of having healthy and moral elements inherent in his philosophy of life and education as a means to attain Truth or God and Self-realization he believed that a philosophy of education would emerge that could put teaching and learning on a firm basis by bringing with it a just social order. According to him his basic scheme of education could check the progressive decay of the villages and lay the foundation of a better social order where there would be no 'unnatural division between the have and the have-nots'.\textsuperscript{43} He further said that his scheme could help to meet the immediate and the ultimate needs of the people without the horrors of a bloody class-war or a colossal capital expenditure, such as would be involved in the mechanization of a vast continent like India.\textsuperscript{44} He was, in fact, advocating a plan for world peace through the right kind of education because, in his view, an educated man could not be someone who would be only
knowledgeable, without possessing the necessary respect and consideration for others or the necessary empathy, insight and farsightedness not to create disorder in society.

The real down-to-earth experiment

What Gandhiji taught was simple living and high thinking. He wanted man to be a real person who could work effectively, productively and above all harmoniously. Louis Fisher's statement about what Gandhiji did to raise the standard of life and education was quite clear. He stated, 'inaugurated his lifelong search for a diet, while sustaining animal man, lifted the mind above the animal', and he wanted us to realize that 'we live not in order to feed, clothe, shelter and pamper the body' but 'we provide for the body in order to live' and, furthermore, 'life begins after the needs of the body have been met'.

Man ought to live in such a way as to use material needs and comforts to promote his spiritual advancement, and this was the great lesson of Gandhiji's experiment in the field of education. What is lacking in our system to-day is that we are not taking into consideration that know-self or self-realization is as important as know-that and know-how, as Gandhiji suggested when he advocated the three H's. Our attention is too much drawn towards externals, without realizing that the conquering of the outer-space is as much important as that of the inner space for man to live as man so that there could be real Progress, Prosperity and Peace, the three P's, which everyone cherishes in order to create a stable society. We must not forget that man has reached the moon but he has not yet reached one another's heart and Gandhiji's formula is such that it could bring this missing link only if educators care to practise what he advocated.
References to Chapter V


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