

Reimagining Education through Gandhian Thought: Social Implications and Implementation

Gurmangeet Kaur Pandey*

Abstract

In this essay, the philosophy of education of Mahatma Gandhi is discussed. The aim of education for Gandhi was the development and integration of mind, body, and soul. He believed in learning by doing. That's why his scheme of education focused on handicraft training. For him, character-building and spiritual freedom were the two prime aims of education. The appropriate medium of instruction, according to him, was the provincial language. He recognized the importance of vocational training and advocated self-supporting education. He was a proponent of the dynamic role of the teacher in the classroom and was against teachers being subordinated to the rigid curriculum as it was done in Macaulay's education system. He had a critical view of the Western education system. His philosophy has been criticized a lot, citing his intentions to perpetuate inequalities. A section is devoted to a critical appraisal of his philosophy to have an intricate understanding of his scheme of education. This counters the common perception against the intent of Gandhi's philosophy of education. If we read Gandhi anonymously, we can easily categorize him in the liberal Western traditions of Tolstoy and John Dewey. The national education policy of 2020 also tries to incorporate Gandhian principles into it. Gandhian Philosophy has become very relevant in our country, struck by high unemployment, climate change, and inequalities. Gandhi's focus on primary education is the mainstay of his policy. It is concluded that despite its shortcomings, MK Gandhi's philosophy of education is still relevant today.

Key words: Education, Gandhian thought

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of truth and non-violence, and his immense contribution to the Indian freedom struggle, are very well known across the globe. But this often leads us to overlook his tremendous contribution to educational theory. We get a great glimpse of Gandhian views on education from his works, *Hind Swaraj* and *Basic Education*. According to *Mahatma Gandhi*, education was the means to ensure an all-around development of the best in child and man and their body, mind, and spirit. For him, literacy was neither an end nor a beginning; it was just a means by which people could get educated. He advocated for the beginning of a child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft. Handicraft, according to him, should be taught both mechanically and scientifically. By this, he meant that the learner should know why and the wherefore of every process (Kumar, n.d.). Gandhi's advocacy for handicrafts comes with a sharp critique of the Western and colonial education system. Gandhi's stance is subject to immense critique in contemporary times. Gandhi ji was the sharpest critic of Western education, which was an offshoot of his critique of Western civilization. He claimed that the Western education system led to neglect of the principles of truth and non-violence, which were the core of Indian civilization. Those who critique Gandhi say that his advocacy for handicrafts and the negation of Western education indirectly perpetuated the existing caste hierarchies. Gandhi's take on education was different from other leaders of that time, for example, Tagore, Gokhale, and Lala Lajpat Rai. These leaders acknowledged the importance of Western education (Kumar 1991, 175).

But we should keep in mind that Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy on education developed in the backdrop of British colonial rule, industrialization, and railways

introduced by the British, and a rapid decline of the Indian handicraft industry. It is in this context that we have to analyze his theory of education. This essay will further discuss the basic elements of Gandhian educational philosophy, its critiques and alternatives, and how, despite its shortcomings, Gandhian philosophy is still relevant in the contemporary world, struck by climate change, unemployment, centralization of economic resources, and political power. The plight of the primary education system in India makes Gandhian philosophy very relevant.

Components of Gandhian Educational Philosophy
We get a glimpse of the Gandhian Philosophy of education primarily from his dialogical work on *Basic Education*. In this, he talks about how the English education system has enslaved our nation, he advocates for self-supporting educational institutions, and he also lists down what qualities teachers should have, he very ardently stresses the importance of vocational training.

The adoption of these ideas is very evident in the *Wardha Scheme* of Education proposed by *Gandhi*. The major component of his educational philosophy is the sharpest criticism of the Western educational system.

a) Aim of Education according to *Mahatma Gandhi*

Character building was the prime aim of education for *Mahatma Gandhi*. He was of the view that once India obtains self-rule after independence, character building will be the highest virtue to be developed to make boys and girls good men and women. '*Sa Vidya ya Vimuktaye*' was the phrase often used by *Gandhi ji*. It meant education is that which liberates. Spiritual freedom is the most important freedom one should have, and achieving this is a vital aim of education (Raval 1958, 22).

b)Medium of instruction

The medium of instruction, according to *Mahatma Gandhi*, should be one's mother tongue. He opined that English education has enslaved the nation. English-knowing Indians have resorted to cheating and striking terror in Indians. He gives an example of the working of courts. As a barrister, he could not speak in his mother tongue in the court. He called it absurd. This was a sign of total structural enslavement. He called for the improvement of all languages. He said that quality English textbooks should be translated into Indian languages. The universal language of India was Hindi, written in both Nagari and Persian scripts. Religion and ethics held prime importance in his eyes. He claimed that India would never be godless and India could not do without it (Gandhi 1951, 53).

(c) Emphasis on vocational education

The most important element of the Gandhian philosophy is still relevant today, which emphasises on vocational education. As mentioned above, Gandhi ardently advocated for education that focused on training children about how to produce handicrafts. He was skeptical about the knowledge of letters. In *Hind Swaraj*, he writes about a peasant who earns his livelihood honestly, has a common understanding of the world, and knows how to treat his parents. He knows moral rules. Gandhi asks what he would do with the knowledge of letters in such a case. He concludes the peasant does not need knowledge of letters. Western education would not add an inch to his happiness (Gandhi 1997, 101). He stated in *Basic Education* that the whole elementary education can be imparted through the counting of spinning yards. Acts of cotton picking, ginning, carding, spinning, sizing, and weaving would help children understand the mechanics, history, and mathematics associated with it. This would further help in integrating the mind, body, and spirit of the learner, which is important for all-around development. Wardha's scheme of education is the epitome of Gandhi's philosophy on education. He stated that a distorted view of the varna system misled our understanding of manual labor and educational training (Gandhi 1951, 39). We started considering manual labor inferior to intellectual labor. He was of the view that vocational training and self-supporting institutions would revive village economies, decline handicraft industries, and help in maintaining good relations between villages and the cities (Gandhi 1951, 51). He gave the example of khadi making. A child would learn it in a year and can earn his livelihood through that. But if the child takes up the education of letters, he would still be unemployed even after seven years of schooling (Gandhi 1951, 42).

(d) Self-supporting education

He advocated self-supporting education, which means in the end, education should pay its own expenses except for the capital, which would remain intact. This proposal was rejected by the national planning

committee, which opined that sustaining the educational institution through the earnings of students themselves was unacceptable (Kumar 1991, 187). He opined that *Nai Talim* (basic education) should be self-supporting for every child. This can happen only by learning occupational skills that would ensure his livelihood. In *Harijan*, he wrote that the running expenses of an institution should be covered by the process of education itself. This means both the teacher and the children had to produce in every act of learning. It would make the nation independent from the very search for employment (Gandhi 1951, 53).

(e) Role of teachers

He also emphasized the role of teachers. He called for the hiring of competent teachers. He said that he had seen that no matter how boring a subject could be, if the teacher was competent, the students would enjoy it and vice versa. He critiqued the Western system of education because it had made the curriculum rigid and fixed, and the teacher was made subordinate to the syllabus. He said that the teacher should always be on a higher pedestal than the syllabus. The idea of keeping a dynamic and live teacher subordinate to a static curriculum was not at all a good idea. According to him, the colonial system divested teachers of the ability to reshape the process of education. Prescribed textbooks and examination systems rendered teachers powerless. He was against this feeble position of a teacher. *Gandhi* opted for a religious role of a teacher rather than a professional role. He proposed a secular model of basic education with a moral role for the teacher. This idea of the teacher was associated with the image of an ashram where the teacher was supposed to set an example of life worth living in front of his students (Kumar 1991, 182).

The idea of basic education for him was clear and simple. Education should be self-supporting, the hands of children should be producing something in some period during the day, basic education should be imparted through provincial languages, fundamental universal ethics should be taught, education should find a way to the homes of the learners and the learners should know at least one link language and that should be Hindustani (both in Devanagari and Persian scripts). This was an overview of the basic principles that are the core of the Gandhian philosophy of education. In contemporary times, we may find certain things outdated and conservative, but we should understand that this philosophy on basic education is still relevant in 21st-century India. It will be discussed further how basic education is a necessity in present-day India.

Critical Appraisal of Basic Education

Gandhi's Dichotomous View of Education and Civilization

Gandhi's views on education don't come without their critiques. *Gandhi's* philosophy is mostly critiqued because of his dichotomous views of

Western and Indian civilization. This dichotomous view comes out very clearly in the chapter 'What is a True Civilization?' in *Hind Swaraj*. He strongly critiques Western civilization and the colonial system of education. He critiques the education of letters. And the criticism becomes very natural when we think about the example of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. The education of letters, which *Gandhi* critiques, was the whole basis for the social mobility of *Babasaheb Ambedkar*. On the question of the dichotomous view of Western and Eastern civilization, Krishna Kumar says that if we try to read *Gandhi* anonymously, we would easily classify it in the Western humanist tradition led by *Owen*, *Tolstoy*, and *Dewey*. It certainly means that if *Gandhi* had a dichotomous view, we would not be able to classify it in the traditions mentioned above (Kumar 1991, 176). He was an ardent advocate of self-sufficiency and autonomy (Kumar 1991, 180). The works of *Leo Tolstoy* had a great influence on him. *Tolstoy* celebrated the individual's right to live in peace and freedom and negated all forms of oppression. This becomes evident in *Gandhi's* idea of spiritual education. He considered mental work equal to manual work (Kumar 1991, 181). This can be related to present-day discrimination between white-collar workers and blue-collar workers.

Handicrafts and Caste Critique

Gandhi promoted handicraft education. Works like shoe-making and weaving were included in the list of handicrafts. It is alleged that this was done with the intent to perpetuate caste inequalities, as it supported the functional view of the caste system. The idea of education supporting the self-sufficiency of the villages was also criticized because the village was seen as an arena of petty politics and a system that led to caste oppression. His idea of handicraft training was heavily criticized.

Krishna Kumar (1991) gives an intricate analysis of *Gandhi's* views and education, which helps us understand the relevance and good intent of his views. How *Gandhi* idealized the moral authority of a teacher, as mentioned above, shows the influence of Indian tradition on his views on education. Nowhere else, according to Kumar, can we see the influence of India's indigenous tradition of education, particularly the Brahmanical tradition, on *Gandhi's* scheme of education (Kumar 1991, 179). Moreover, when he talks about the dynamic role of the teacher and criticizes the subordination of teachers to fixed, prescribed textbooks, *Gandhi* comes out as a libertarian.

If we talk about the introduction of productive handicrafts in the curriculum of the Gandhian Scheme, it implied a direct conflict between indigenous knowledge systems and *Gandhi's* scheme of education. It introduced education related to those occupations in the curriculum on which only lower castes had a monopoly on. It was given the status of a compulsory subject and introduced into the core

curriculum. He advocated self-supporting institutions to ensure that there is no political interference and economic centralization of resources.

Debates on Industrialization and Village Economy

Another critique of *Gandhi* was that if we focus too much on village self-sufficiency today, and in the future, when the time comes when we inevitably have to introduce industrialization in India. Would India be ready to sustain that kind of industrialization? *Gandhi* answered that it would not happen in India anytime soon and that whenever it would happen, India would not be bereft of its villages. Hence, it is important to ensure the sufficiency of villages through basic education. It is true that even after introducing neo-liberalisation in India in 1991, we have a considerable number of villages in India where the population is disguisedly unemployed in agriculture. It makes it clear how important building a village economy is (Raval 1958, 38).

Even if we see his advocacy of handicraft training as a means of perpetuating inequalities, we should see it in the context in which he was writing. *Hind Swaraj* was written in 1909. The handicraft industry had declined due to colonial expansion, and railways at that time were becoming a means of economic exploitation of the Indian colony and the eventual financial drain. Maybe it came from the anxiety of the decline of handicraft and cottage industry as a cause of the economic drain of India, that *Gandhi* became an ardent advocate of handicraft training. Indians could only get into administrative jobs with the 'education of letters'. In this scenario, handicraft training would have ensured basic employment and self-sufficiency. Advocating vocational training and self-supporting institutions was his way of countering the economic expansion of the colonial empire.

Critiques and Marginalization of Gandhian Educational Ideals in Early National Planning

It should be noted that Gandhian principles were not included in the report by the National Planning Committee constituted by Congress. Some of the principles were even criticized. NPC's focus was on a centrally controlled economy and the development of large-scale industries. It was outrightly opposite to *Gandhi's* vision of Village Swaraj and self-sufficiency. The report proposed that militarization and development should go hand in hand. This was again opposite to the utopic view held by *Gandhi* (Kumar 1991, 187). The Wardha Scheme of basic education was even criticized by the subcommittee. It stated that teaching vocation at such a small age can prove to be harmful, and sustaining schools through children's earnings would mean the prevalence of child labour in the schools. Teaching general subjects through a narrowed-down medium was called superficial and defective by the committee. It should be accepted that the Gandhian scheme had its flaws. But not focusing on basic education in the early years of Independence had its consequences. The entire focus was on heavy industries and higher education,

without a particular focus on mass education and literacy (Kumar 1991, 190).

Incorporation of Gandhian Principles in National Education Policy 2020

The education policy of 2020 tries to incorporate the Gandhian Philosophy to revamp the education system. For instance, the autonomy of the institutions was very close to *Gandhi* ji's heart, and NEP aims to make all colleges autonomous in the next fifteen years. NEP also emphasizes multilingualism. It states that the medium of instruction till class fifth and preferably till class eighth shall be in the mother tongue of the child. This resonates very well with *Gandhi*'s emphasis that the medium of instruction at the basic level should be in provincial languages. NEP aims to start vocational education from class six itself with internships. This is also an excellent incorporation of the Gandhian Scheme in NEP. *MK Gandhi* also emphasized the importance of handicrafts and vocational training in *Basic Education* and *Hind Swaraj* and his article in *Harijan* and *Young India*.

If we try to outline the stages of learning as characterized by *Gandhi* ji, basic education meant education from seven years of age to fourteen. It also had two more components. They were post-basic education and pre-basic education. Pre-basic education was before the age of seven, and post-basic education was after the age of fourteen. This timeline proposed by *MK Gandhi* broadly corresponds to the timeline proposed by NEP 2020, i.e., 5+3+3+4 (Das 2020). As we know, first and foremost aim of education for *Gandhi* ji was character building, NEP echoes the same ethos as the aim of education. NEP focuses on holistic development and tries to eliminate the current obsession with rote learning and memorization-based learning. This is very similar to the development of mind, body, and spirit, which is called the aim of education, proposed by *Gandhi*. NEP aims to develop logical and critical thinking; this is very similar to *Gandhi*'s basic education, which expected the child to learn about practical and moral aspects of life instead of just rote learning the concept in the education of letters (Singh 2022).

NEP advocates the idea of *Lok Vidya* (education for all) by *Gandhi*. This means there is a focus on inclusivity where children from marginalized groups are provided similar opportunities. It is well-known how important the role of a teacher was to *Gandhi*. The teacher for him was always on the upper pedestal compared to the static curriculum. NEP also proposed the critical role of teachers in molding responsible citizens of India. NEP acknowledges that students should not be passive recipients of knowledge. This is also similar to Gandhian philosophy, where children should have their rational thought, and the classroom must be the center for rational thinking. Similarly, NEP states that we should switch from a program-based assessment framework to a year-round assessment structure (Singh 2022).

We can see how Gandhian views are echoed in the New Education Policy of 2020. This can help in the total revamp of our education system, particularly the primary education system, which was not paid much attention to just after independence.

Relevance of Basic Education in Contemporary India
The ideas of *Gandhi* on Education, despite their critiques, are still relevant for both India and the world. Some of its aspects can be tailored and modified according to the needs of 21st-century India and implemented. The New Education Policy can be cited as a prime example where Gandhian ideas have been incorporated according to the needs of the hour.

The full of plight of the primary education system of India compels us to revisit *Gandhi*'s basic education. Basic education was entirely centered around the importance of primary education. Primary education since independence has not been paid much attention to. The Nehruvian model paid entire attention to higher education. Nehru's government failed to pay attention to mass education and literacy. It led to the further decay of the primary and secondary education systems in India. The development of a robust primary education system is the mainstay of the development (social, political, and economic) of any country. There is no point in building imminent higher educational institutions where only children of certain elite families can go and a significant population is deprived of basic primary education. Gandhian scheme of basic education can offer a way to build a robust primary education system.

We all know that approximately 70% of India's population lives in villages, and 54% of the workforce is still employed in agriculture. People are disguisedly employed on farms. This makes us realize how important imparting technical/ vocational education is in the villages. This also calls for the development of cottage and MSME industries in villages to ensure a robust village economy. Here again, *Gandhi*'s vocational training scheme offers pathways to shift individuals in disguised unemployment away from agriculture and engage them in productive technical occupations. Gandhian philosophy was right in asserting that village self-sufficiency should be focused upon, as even when industrialization comes, India would never be bereft of the villages.

The challenge of climate change also compels us to think about how the Gandhian idea of self-sufficiency can help to ensure sustainable development. Gandhian ideas of production sit in

harmony with the environment. In a world where heavy industrialization has altogether transformed the weather patterns, and all industrialists are busily greenwashing, the Gandhian scheme has the potential to be highly environmentally sustainable

The idea of handicraft training can be modified and implemented in the present times. India has an alarming unemployment rate. This is because people lack skills. If the Gandhian scheme is adopted

according to the needs of modern industrial work, then it can help in curbing the alarmingly high unemployment rates. For instance, quality polytechnic schools should be opened. This would help in countering challenges posed by unemployment and the gig economy.

Gandhian scheme can also help in curbing the centralization of political power and economic resources in the education system (Chander 2019, 157). *Gandhi* strongly advocated autonomy and self-sufficiency of educational institutions. This can counter the problem of interference in the working of educational institutions. Economic self-sufficiency of educational institutions would be fiscally prudent for the government, too.

Hence, if the Gandhian scheme of basic education is adapted to contemporary realities, it has the potential to bring transformative changes to the ailing Indian education system

Conclusion

Despite its shortcomings, we cannot disregard the Gandhian scheme of education. What looks conservative and outdated today should be read in the context of the period in which it was written. We should mould the scheme according to the needs of 21st-century India and then implement it. NEP 2020 tries to do this, subject to its implementation. For example, when we talk about handicraft training, we should modify this and focus on the training of those vocations that fulfill the needs of modern industrial society. *Gandhi ji's* emphasis on basic education is highly relevant in today's time, looking at the state of primary education in India. Only the rich can afford quality private Montessori and private schools. The state of government primary schools is in dilapidated conditions, except in some states and UTs. The national planning committee and the Nehruvian model failed to acknowledge the importance of elementary and primary education and just focused on higher education. If basic education is not focused on, the outcome is the perpetuation of class and caste inequalities. If Gandhian principles are implemented in a true sense, they can help in bringing positive social implications. The rising unemployment challenge demands improvement in the skill set of the Indian youth. This is why vocational and technical training is important for Indian youth. The looming challenge of climate change demands development

that is in harmony with the environment. Gandhian principles can help in this situation. Hence, despite its shortcomings, Gandhian philosophy on education is still relevant in India even after 77 years of independence.. The Gandhian scheme of basic education, with its emphasis on self-reliance, vocational training, and holistic development, remains highly relevant in addressing contemporary challenges in India's education system. If implemented in a suitably modified form, it can serve as a powerful tool to overcome issues like rote learning, skill deficiency, inequality in access, and infrastructural gaps, and thereby lay the foundation for a more inclusive, practical, and value-based education framework.

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