



## Revisiting Gandhi's scheme of basic education and the emerging social crises

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### Abstract

Gandhiji's idea of basic education has a far-reaching and a powerful tool to bring social transformation in society. It promotes an intellectual, physical and moral dimensions of education among the learners and intends to nurture self-reliant individuals along with fostering communal bond. This article explores the historical context of his basic education, its fundamental principles and contemporary reaction to it. It would further examine renewed relevance of his ideas in today's multicultural, pluralistic and neo-liberal economic environment where individuals and groups increasingly assert their own identities and engage in fierce competition.

Article would highlight that how the neglect of Gandhian principles has contributed for the emergence of several modern social challenges such as rapid migration, decline of rural society and economy, weakening community affiliations, linguistic superiority, communal tensions, psychological distress, widening economic disparities and aversion to manual labour. By revisiting the foundational philosophy of basic education, this article aims to suggest that how Gandhian thought can offer meaningful pathways to enrich and strengthen the current democratic environment.

Moreover, the article critically evaluates National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 to assess the extent to which it incorporates elements of Gandhian vision of education. It investigates whether the policy addresses the social crises emerging from present education and economic systems and whether it succeeds in promoting holistic, inclusive and value-based education in alignment with Gandhian ideals.

**Keywords:** Basic education, national education policy 2020, neo-liberal economic environment, social crisis

### Introduction

The character, nature and the outlook of a society on secular as well as spiritual issues are largely shaped by the education system it adopts. The diverse societies across the globe define the nature and the purpose of their respective education systems. This article intends to study some of the fundamental educational and economic challenges of the Indian students in the light of ignoring Gandhian concept of basic education and the continuation of western English education. Mahatma Gandhi was not only a national political leader fighting for Indian political freedom, but also a prominent thinker, social reformer and an educationist. He was engaged with educational experiments during his stay in South Africa where some basic English, mother tongue, reading, writing, arithmetic along with some basic skills such as farming, shoe-making etc. were taught (Sadgopal, 2019, p. 12) <sup>[10]</sup>. He continued his educational experiments after coming to India in his Ashrams. He also encouraged other local leaders to take up the charge of education among the lower caste people and the tribal communities. Indian National Congress under his guidance was also committed to extend educational services to the people of this country as reflected in its Karachi Resolution of 1931 where it promised to introduce free and compulsory basic education to all children (Chandra, 1989, p. 284) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Thus, it would be pertinent here to comprehend the context and content of Gandhian principles of basic education. The article also aims at exploring the relevance and the significance of his educational ideas in today's context of high unemployment, rising psychological stress, suicidal tendencies among the youth, shrinking villages, filthy public places, environmental hazardous, communal and linguistic tensions, increasing violence and so on.

### Contextualizing Basic Education

The nature and the reach of education has always been contested. Where Brahmanical education was mainly religious in nature and restricted to the upper caste only in ancient and medieval times, on the contrary, secular education was promoted in India in colonial era in order to meet colonial secular interests. New colonial administrative and economic opportunities were created and the English education became pre-requisite to grab those economic opportunities (Seal, 1971, pp. 114-130) <sup>[12]</sup>. But with the growth of nationalism in India in later half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, nationalists felt to have a different education system which would be nationalistic in character, accessible to the ordinary masses of the country and capable of promoting Indian culture and anti-colonial fervour among youths (Sarkar, 1973, pp. 149-181) <sup>[11]</sup>. National leaders such as Arobindo, Tilak, Tagore, Lajpat Rai, Gandhi and others stressed on the introduction and the growth of Indian national educational institutions. Thus, several native national schools and colleges came into existence particularly in 1920s and 1930s during and after non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements.

Contrarily, colonial government had its own imperial motives for promoting western English education as they were overburdened with the ideas of 'white men's burden' and 'civilizing mission.' Nevertheless, benefits of colonial education were mainly reaching to the upper castes and upper classes. Ordinary masses were still far from it. Efforts of colonial government to promote western education became more minimal in 1920s-30s as Government of India Act 1919 introduced a system of diarchy at the level of provincial administration and the provincial subjects were

divided into two as Reserved and Transferred subjects. Education was pushed among the transferred subjects. Act further split the revenue sources into Central and Provincial sources. Additionally, a 'joint purse system' was introduced at the provinces where Executive Councilors, in-charge of reserved Departments and Ministers, in-charge of transferred Departments held a meeting together under the chairmanship of Governor of the province and decided a proper allocation of revenue to each department including reserved and transferred as per their financial needs. In this system, it was extremely difficult to receive appropriate funding for the transferred subjects (Naik and Nurullah, 1974, p. 318) <sup>[8]</sup> like education. Moreover, central government also withdrew its financial support for the growth of education. It became only an advisory body as Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) was constituted in 1921. It worked only for few years between 1921-1923. It was dissolved in 1923 and later revived in 1936 (Prasad, 2014, p. 195). Hence, Indian education system could not flourish during this time. In this backdrop, Gandhiji was conceptualizing his concept of basic education.

### Conceptualizing Basic Education

The Government of India Act 1935 replaced the system of diarchy with provincial autonomy and education was made a provincial subject. British government announced elections at the centre and the provinces. After a careful deliberation, Congress contested the elections and managed to form its ministries in eight out of eleven provinces. It was the ideal time when Congress could form its policies and implement them in the provinces.

As discussed above that Gandhiji had a deep concern for education particularly for lower caste people. He already had several educational experiments not only in India but also in South Africa. He also made some serious efforts to promote education among the lower caste children particularly in 1930s. After the Poona-pact in 1932, he invigorated his efforts for the education of scheduled caste children with immediate establishment of Harijan Sevak Sangh (Guha, 2010, pp. 222-227) <sup>[3]</sup>. Congress also committed to offer free and compulsory primary education to the children of this country irrespective of their caste and creed. Having assumed political power in different provinces in 1937, Marwari Education Society organized an All India Educational Conference under his leadership in October 1937 at Werdha. All Education Ministers of seven provinces and the teachers of the national schools and universities were invited. He introduced the idea of a Basic Education Scheme or Buniyadi Shiksha in this conference which was later incorporated in the broader canvas of Nai Taleem (New Education).

He first offered a scathing critique of western education. He argued, "The present system of education does not meet the requirements of the country in any shape or form. English, having been made the medium of instruction in all the higher branches of learning, has created a permanent bar between the highly educated few and the uneducated many. It has prevented knowledge from percolating to the masses. The excessive importance given to English has cast upon the educated class a burden which has maimed them mentally for life and made them strangers in their own land" (Varkey, 1939, p. 3) <sup>[13]</sup>. He further stated, "Absence of vocational

training has made the educated class almost unfit for productive work and harmed them physically. Money spent on primary education is a waste of expenditure as what little is taught is soon forgotten and has little or no value in terms of the villages or cities. Such advantage as is gained by the existing system of education is not gained by the chief taxpayer, their children getting the least" (Ibid, p. 3).

While highlighting the key principles of basic education, He stressed on its three core elements which were a close interplay of knowledge and skills, importance of mother tongue as the medium of instruction and the self-supporting education. He argues that knowledge should be imparted to the children through a trade or a handicraft. He offered an example of a *Takli* (spindle). It would be a practical knowledge without burden. Other useful skills like agriculture, horticulture, leather tanning, shoe-making, cleaning to toilets etc. should be taught. All other subjects like mathematics, science, etc. must be taught through these practical trades. He states, "I would develop in child his hands, brain and soul. It is the falls idea that the intelligence could be developed through books alone."

In regards to Language in education was concerned, he opined that Indian languages were true representative of our culture, civilization and true genius of our nation. Education through English medium have created a permanent bar between the highly educated few and uneducated many. It has made our children practically foreign in our own land.

Gandhiji advocated for self-supporting education. He says that children must know and practice any craft or trade to support their education. It might seem contradictory for many as Congress was committed to offer free and compulsory primary education to all children. Hence his idea of self-supporting was vehemently criticized by many scholars. It was argued that Gandhiji and the Congress were in favour of total prohibition which had a huge detrimental effect on the economic health of the provinces as total prohibition hit the income of the provinces. Additionally, people were already overburdened with different kinds of taxes. Peasantry and the tribal communities were subjected to high land revenue and forest laws. Thus, Congress was not in a position to raise the further taxes. Therefore, Gandhi was stressing for self-supporting education in order to hide Congress's commitment of free and compulsory education. His critiques contended that it was not his preferred pedagogy but a way to keep the promise of Congress of total prohibition. Few argued that state should finance the education and children should not asked to work. He was also criticized for supporting and promoting the child-labour. But none of these accusations appears to be true as he truly believed in the idea of basic education. He was practicing it and writing about it on various occasions even quite before of 1931 Karachi Resolution of the Congress. Gandhiji himself tried to clarify the position. He asserted that the problem of education was "unfortunately mixed up with the disappearance of drink revenues" (Sadgopal, 2019) <sup>[10]</sup>. He also pointed out that what he discovered in 1937 was not the scheme, but its Educational Reconstruction in different provinces. For Gandhi, education was not in the priority of the British Raj. Moreover, British could not be expected to finance anti-colonial and national ideas. Nai talim based on skills or handicrafts suited to the environment of the children would continue to sustain the bond between an individual and a society, child would be

self-sufficient, it would create a dutiful individual who could contribute for the economy of society and the country.

### Rising Social Crises

**Migration:** Though, some initiatives are taken primarily by some Gandhians at individual level to implement his vision of education. Gandhi Gram (Tamil Nadu), Nai Talim Samiti (Wardha) and Gandhi Viddya Mandir (Rajasthan) are some of the prominent institutions among them. However, Indian state has largely failed to realize his vision of education and to implement it. As a result, a number of challenges are arising in contemporary time. After more than seventy-five years of Indian independence, Gandhian vision of rural reconstruction could not be achieved as large number of rural population has constantly been migrating to the urban centres for their education and livelihood. Today's generation is not interested in agriculture. In fact, the profession of agriculture has become a contemptuous profession for most of our youths. People do not want to settle down in villages. They do not have love and respect for their villages and their people in the absence of economic opportunities in the villages. In this way, they are compelled to get uprooted from their own village-land and village society. A large number of villages of states like Uttarakhand are getting deserted due to huge migration of people to urban centres in search of employment. Migration of people appears to be physical in nature, however, it is a gradual process towards the extinction of a beautiful culture of a particular place. It is a process of a disastrous disintegration of the village community. It is quite opposite to the Gandhian principle of rural reconstruction as he advocated for self-reliance village society and economy. People are compelled to live in isolated urban environment and they anyhow help the capitalistic idea of appropriation of wealth in few hands. But their own economic condition does not improve as expected and they continue to struggle throughout the life for their basic survival needs.

**Suicides Among Students:** Every year, lakhs of people are graduating. They have a tremendous pressure to score excellently well in their examinations. However, most of them are not getting appropriate and respected jobs. Therefore, suicide rate among the students and the unemployed youth is constantly increasing. As per NCRB report of 2022, a total of 13044 students committed suicide in the year 2022. This NCRB report was based on Police FIRs. There would be suicides unreported to the police. However, if NCRB statistics are taken at a face value, it would be shocking to note nearly sixty-four per cent increase in the suicide rate among the students between 2013 and 2022. (India Today, September 30<sup>th</sup> 2024) <sup>[4]</sup>. Two important factors must be considered to assess this situation. First, education has generally been understood in terms of white-collars jobs. It is construed as guarantee to be employed. Second, it is the systematic failure of the governments and the societies to make education purely academic and theoretical. It does not impart skill based vocational training as per the learner's need and environment. Though, the Kothari Commission (1964-66), National Policy of Education (1986) and NPE (2020) in particular have emphasized to promote skill-based education at various levels, however, government and the civil society have not made their sincere efforts to implement the recommendations of various education commissions in the

letter and spirit to offer skill based education to their children. Hence, a number of business tycoons reiterated time in again that they are not finding employable youths for their enterprises as they do not possess required skills. In early 2025, nearly eighty per cent employers were not getting skilled and potential people to hire in their firms. (Indo-Asian News Service, January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2025) <sup>[5]</sup>. This is really ironical that job-seekers and employee-seekers are finding each other but either of the parties is not getting desired employee and employer.

**Love for Labour:** Gandhiji had a serious commitment to his work and a special emphasis on the dignity of labour. For him, the work was worship. He used to perform all his tasks from writing correspondence to spinning, from holding prayer meetings to sanitation on his own. He not only clean his own latrine but clean toilet of his Ashram. He used to work as a sanitary worker in the filthy colonies of scheduled caste people. But today, people do not only hate to perform sanitation work but also the sanitary worker. They are averse to manual labour and firm believers in the hierarchy of labour and labourers without realizing the significance of each work. Our education system is not producing labour-loving and ethical beings. It is common to see filthy public places everywhere in the country. Thus, Prime Minister of India had to launch a flagship programme of 'Clean India Mission' in 2016. It shows inabilities of thousands of schools and colleges to train sanitation loving and moral characters.

**Peace, morality and Democracy:** Needless to say that Gandhi wanted to build such a society based on cooperation and interdependence. Thus, he argues that the mission of life should be peace-building and peace can only be attained and maintained if Education system is based on morality, ethics and the ideals of humanism. It can eliminate violence, fear, jealousy from society and promote love, brotherhood, interdependence and peaceful coexistence which are crucial to strengthen true socialist democracy. Being an indigenous resident of India, our constitution automatically make us citizens and offers citizenship rights. However, for the multicultural pluralistic countries like India, it is crucial to build a society void of discrimination on the ground of class, caste, gender, disability and so on. Unfortunately, violence, hatred, discrimination, fear, greed, exploitation, hierarchies etc. still exist in our society to a greater extent.

### Conclusion

With the beginning and growing of neo-liberal economic environment world over, education has become an enterprise or a profit-making entity, largely dictated by the west. We have forgotten the meaning, value and application of education. Where Gandhi's vision was to produce self-reliance, individuals rooted in their natural environment and attached to their people and culture, on the contrary, modern education intends to supply workforce for the capitalists. Gandhi focused on rural reconstruction through his vision of education. He advocated for decentralization of education. Modern education uproots children from their land and people, put them in psychological trauma many a times, thus, suicide rate is increasing among the school-going children.

The colonial idea of 'west is best' still exists which has cstill colonized our body and mind. We have lost the sense of freedom and the colonized folks cannot enrich our

democracy. NPE 2020 advocates for inclusion for all, equitable educational and vocational opportunities for all and for reaching to the last person in the social hierarchy. But how would it be possible by imitating the west without realizing local realities in the light of increasing privatization of education? India lacks proper infrastructure to implement lofty vision of NPE 2020 as quality education has become a distant dream for many due to widening economic disparities in society. Basic Education starts child's education from the age of seven. On the contrary, NPE starts child's education at the age of three. This is terrible for the child and the society but good for the capitalists. Families would be bound to send their children to school at a very tender age and incur the expenditure for it. Though, the play-way method for learning is advocated, however, most of the private schools do not have enough infrastructure and trained human resource to embrace this method.

Promoting communal harmony and dignity of labour was his goal. NPE also attempts to promote national integrity, but fails to offer the roadmap to achieve it. Nai Talim has a potential to make a village child a businessman and a trader as stresses on production, distribution and marketing skills. But NPE is preparing children for petty jobs for the capitalists. Nai Talim wanted to create a happier, healthier, more intelligent and ideal people.

Gandhi and NPE 2020 both rejected the importance of modern colonial education in different ways. Though, NPE follows the modern educational epistemologies, however, it invokes all eminent scholars from ancient Indian history. It does not take modern examples like Raja Rammohan Roy, Jagdish Chandra Bose, Vikram Sarabhai, APJ Abdul Kalam, Homi Bhabha etc. Western and Brahmanical education is an elite knowledge, excludes majority. Gandhiji attempted to change the status-quo. Whereas NPE 2020 and other official educational documents are designed in a way to maintain the status-quo to a great extent. Unfortunately, his vision of education could not be materialized due to competing colonial legacy structures, urban-elite aspiration, bureaucratic centralization and dilution into fragmented vocational schemes in independent India and we are constantly encountering enumerable social crises such as internal and external migration, desertion of villages, lack of ethical beings, rising suicides among students, absence of dignity of labour and so on.

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