

Education as an agent of change (Educational Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi)

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“Literary education is of no value, if it is not able to build up a sound character.”

– Mahatma Gandhi

[Mahatma Gandhi was not a philosopher in the formal sense of the term. He said that action was his domain. However, we find a clear blue-print of his Social Philosophy that incorporated all necessary aspects of life and living, mundane and metaphysical, as Gandhiji left nothing untouched under the Sun.]

Education is a many splendoured word, concept or social institution and so many dimensions can be derived from it. While the classical definition may be a method or a process to bring out the best in man-body, mind and spirit or soul, to which Mahatma Gandhi himself subscribed, to help man realize his own self and take his due part in the society ensuring in the process his protection from any form of exploitation. (*“Man is neither mere intellect, nor the gross animal body nor the heart and the soul alone. A proper and harmonious combination of all three (3) is required for the making of the whole man and constitutes the true economics of education”* - Harijan, May 8, 1937). Also, education could be a change-agent for transformation of a society suffering from structural oppression or even a system-maintainer as Macaulay would have it. Education has been found to be elitist as well that creates division in the society or complexes that provoked Ivan Illych to formulate his theory of ‘De-schooling Society’ or Everett Rhymer to announce ‘The School is Dead’ deriving from the Gandhian paradigm or an extension to root out any source of violence.

Pitrim Sorokin, the famous social scientist, while structuring his highly thought-provoking book ‘Reconstruction of Humanity’; dedicated to one ‘Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’ described the present civilisation as ‘Sense Civilisation’, the dominant thrust being satisfaction of one’s sense-organs and thus specified another dimension when he observed that humanity, bleeding from war wounds and frightened by the atomic Frankenstein of destruction, was desperately looking for a way out of death trap and wanted peace in place of war, love in lieu of hate and greater wisdom.

Almost in the similar vein Mahatma Gandhi observed to Maria Montessori at the end of 1931, in Italy itself, that to reach peace in this world and to go from love to love that ensures peace, that consciously or unconsciously the whole world was hungering, we should have to work in two areas – children and education: That I feel, fix up today the meaning and goal of education or a new dimension-peace and real or true democracy.

Infact, the Gandhian paradigm is altogether different from other theoreticians in the sense that he had a comprehensive and holistic approach to education, like his attitude to other aspects of life and living, to achieve an equitable, non-domineering, non-exploitative, non-violent social order with maximum individual liberty to limitest possible state-control and raise ‘cultured’ individuals to sustain the emerging new society. For Gandhiji was more concerned

with the quality and content of life and that for all, particularly those in the lower rung of the society or at the receiving end. Mere accumulation of knowledge and information by few or status and nearness to power for a few or so called 'insiders' with vast majority lagging behind or so called 'outsiders' for no fault of theirs, whether in the 'developed' or 'developing' countries or even in the under-developed societies throughout the Globe, dismayed the Mahatma.

Pragmatic as he was with a long-range view, he was also an innovative personality who gave a new meaning and dimension to age-old concepts. Gandhiji realised the true purpose of education in the emerging context of his endeavour and reshaped the contents and methodology so that it could reach everyone or all could come under one system so that division on any count-economic, gender, caste or creed disappears altogether and 'Sarvodaya' was achieved.

He called it Basic Education – that which was a minimum necessary for growth of a 'cultured citizen' – 'cultured' because in the ultimate 'power-structure' conceived by the Mahatma he is always prepared for supreme sacrifice if need be. It should start from the very base with the parents, to whom a child is exposed first, being the teachers. Gandhiji observed at one place that education is a continuous process in one's life – from conception to death – and it could be varied in consonance with the necessities of a 'Good' and 'truthful' living, ensuring in the process such living for others. Gandhiji's society may be called 'Truth Society' also where 'voluntary control' is a basic necessity that one would have to learn from the very base or early life.

While formulating his ideas on Education he had certain things in mind.

I, for one, regard Gandhiji as the only complete Revolutionary who undertook 'destruction' and 'construction' at the same time. While he was trying to bring down the highly exploitative colonial structure he was building up his own developing so many organisations and putting choicest people to lead. Gandhiji, one may find out, almost made men out of clay as Mahamati Gokhale once observed.

When Gandhiji gave a call to the countrymen to boycott British services, courts and educational institutions, he was aware that he had to have substitutes and that gave birth to the concept of 'Basic Education'. We may here pay our tributes to the Founders of National Educational Institutions spearheaded by Sri Aurobindo at an earlier time, the necessity being almost the same. Gandhiji of course, was disillusioned about the state of 'education' and that also denied to a vast rung of population, particularly the rural masses who, Gandhiji thought, formed the bulk of the population here. So, not only as a historic necessity or in exigency, but for 'true' education with all its grandreous attributes and dimensions, Gandhiji experimented with his ideas about education, first in far off South Africa and continued it after coming over to his Motherland. We may remember here that, whether in South Africa or here, he had in his charge the children of 'Satyagrahis', who also in the process would take their parents' places or form the second line to fight against injustice, oppression and exploitation, which actually happened.

Gandhiji was also aware about the 'cost' involved that might have prevented most to have even the semblance of education. Hence he wanted to make it self-supporting, that

while learning the learners would also be earning. But this was not mere vocational training, but with great dimensions. Actually, while formulating his concept he had in his mind the state of the situation in his country. He also thought that this would ultimately teach everyone to become self-supporting and self-sufficient in the process. (***“Basic education must become literally education for life. All educational activity of the Government should be on basic education lines. If I had my way, I would conduct adult education drives also through a basic craft. In my opinion, cotton spinning and the allied processes are crafts par excellence for this purpose.”*** – Mahatma Gandhi).

Gandhiji had other ideas also. He wanted education to be system builder, instead of system maintainer. He perceived that one day there might be a clash between the ‘educated-privileged’ and the ‘under-educated or unprivileged’. As such he tried to delink education from employment and orient it, as I have observed earlier, to such effect that it might lead to the upliftment of the downtrodden, to diffusion of power, to a culture of non-accumulation and equity, in essence a non-elitist society, what he called nonviolent social order, instead of a society based on conflict, competition, exploitation, over-organisation, greed, power and profit.

The contents of education or curriculum would also change accordingly, not only the usual ones, but truthfulness, matters of health, nutrition, co-operation, helping parents in domestic jobs and social service and obviously engagement in some gainful activity, would ultimately prepare a child to assume his proper and beneficial role in society in the future. He also wanted to teach the students intricacies or working of every process so that this did not remain mechanical or artificial to them but involved them for assimilation and further flowering. At least the endeavour should be aimed at it. Interestingly Gandhiji wanted to teach drawing first and the medium of instruction at the primary stage ‘Mother-Toungue’. He found out that one could easily learn the other languages if the foundation is strong. (***“Real education is impossible through a foreign medium”*** – Mahatma Gandhi)

Another important criterion we must take into consideration is that since Gandhiji talked of raising the society non-meritorious would need more attention to guarantee an equitable opportunity to all section of the population. I mean the reverse process. It would also require naturally a different set of measures for evolution – the ultimate aim. It should also have a new typology of institutions, technologies, ‘sizes’ of industries and management considerations and even criterions for ‘employment’.

What I am at, through the Gandhian paradigm, is to prepare people through education to accept the reality that co-sharing should be the order. Affluence cannot be guaranteed for all, since to be so called affluent the United States of America consume a huge amount of the world-resources while they merely form 7% of the world population. So production will follow the minimum necessary consumption-level, wages and prices do not chase each other, centralised large scale monoliths collapse in the milieu, consensus not majority rules the day and a stable social and economic life emerges and thus the new education helps remove the last vestiges of violence from its roots bringing in the process peace and democracy.

