

Mahatma Gandhi's Convictions on Child and Child Education

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Abstract: Mahatma Gandhi was an epitome of non-violent resistance. He was among India's greatest intellectuals. His valuable thoughts on education and rights of child should be followed in every bit. Gandhiji's thoughts on the basic rights of a child are really praise worthy. He was highly creative and individualistic in his temperament, thinking and functioning. In addition to his worldwide famous political philosophy, satyagraha (truthfulness) and ahimsa (non-violence) that he used in achieving his various goals, he was an ardent lover of children. Mahatma Gandhi's personal perspectives on child, especially the principles of child rearing are almost unknown. In this article an attempt has been made to discuss about Mahatma Gandhi's unique attachment towards children and his fascinating thoughts about child education especially primary and basic education. The relevance of his thoughts to the present-day Indian society and education would also be discussed at the end. Descriptive method and secondary sources of data have been used for the present study.

Key Words: Mahatma Gandhi, child rearing, child education, primary education, basic education.

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Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi is one of the foremost free thinkers of India, be it in the matter of politics, religion or education. He is one of the leading thinkers who fought for liberating India from the bondage of the West-not only politically, but also intellectually. He was one of the pioneers, not only in having stood for India's political freedom, but also in having made sincere and bold experiments in education. He made attempts at revolutionizing Indian educational thought, and restoring the truly national mind, which for nearly two centuries have been suppressed, by starting national system of education.

John Ruskin's book, "Unto this last" had a great impact on Gandhi.¹ Especially he was influenced by Ruskin's view on real education. Speaking on the subject, Gandhi said that he was of the same opinion as that of Ruskin that it was sheer error to suppose, as is generally done, that even if it is inadequate or flawed, some literary education is preferable to none at all. He shared Ruskin's view that we should strive for real education alone.² He was the first to think in terms of the education for the masses in India long before India got Independence, and probably Mahatma Gandhi was one of the two great men (he and Rabindranath Tagore) who ventured to make bold experiments in education and also to pronounce to the world that India has something to contribute to others. Tagore started Santiniketan to rescue the children from the grip of a mechanical system of education, to call them away from the dead enclosures of classes into a systematic relationship with nature and life, to help them to grow in an atmosphere of creative and social activity and discipline them by the responsibility of freedom. However, Tagore was also influenced by Gandhi's thoughts on education.³

Child in Gandhi's Life and his Principles on Child Rearing

Children occupied a very great place in Gandhiji's life. He would absorb and lose himself in little children, live, for the moment, their emotions, joys and sorrows and would also impart proper instruction to the little ones. When children approached him, 'Now I'm going to regain my mental tranquility', he would tell himself because his head would be filled with taxing problems when he found himself in the company of various types of persons, and the children's presence brought him mental peace.⁴ Gandhiji, as a man, was extraordinary and unique. His laugh was filled with the quality of children's innocence. He did not forget children even when he was confined to prison. In 1930, he wrote in Yerawada jail a booklet for children that comprised twelve lessons. The original of this book, 'Gandhi and Children', was written in Marathi language under the title, 'Mulanche Gandhi'. It was released on the auspicious day of Gandhi Jayanti, October 2, 1963. Mahatma Gandhi possessed extraordinary love for children. Hence, he once told the King of England, George V, that children were his life. He regarded them as living personification of enthusiasm. Gandhiji's love for children was something strongly powerful. He would become a child himself when he found himself among them.

It would be hard to find a better and more loving teacher than him. He incessantly tried to see that the children practiced cleanliness and they remained clean and neat. He exerted himself fully to see that children remained occupied in work and developed self-reliance. He would never stand idleness and lack of cleanliness among children. 'Education really starts

from children's birth', he frequently said. 'Punishment does not improve children but on the contrary, makes them more stubborn', was his honest opinion.⁵ Bapuji held the view that it was not necessary to impart any training to children for the first five years from their birth was a completely erroneous one. On the contrary, the education a child imbibes during these first five years could never be secured in its later life. Writing on children's education Gandhiji once said: "Their guardians impart real education to the children. There is no need of outside help for it. Good children who receive careful supervision from their guardians do not suffer from bad effects even if they happen to be educated in the company of bad children. One cannot guarantee that children wrapped in soft cotton wool would remain free from temptation and vices. Before children learn their first alphabet, they must be taught what soul is, what truth is, what the value of love is. It is the real foundation of education when children are able to realize that hate can be conquered by love; truth dominates over untruth; self-suffering can defeat violence. Children are naturally innocent and affectionate"⁶ He felt that children were flowers. His conviction was that one who established close relationship with them would realize a manifestation of divinity; and it was with this feeling that he would enter into the emotions of children and their joys and sorrows to a remarkable degree.

Gandhiji's Views on Child Education

Gandhiji had attuned himself to the life of children. Gandhi had put in a considerable amount of contemplative writing on children's education. Women, in Gandhiji's view, could carry out the tasks of children's education more efficiently than men. In one of the articles, he says: "Women instead of men and mothers instead of spinsters could handle education of little boys and girls more successfully. I consider children's education as one of the noble activities of service"⁷ Education does not mean according to Gandhiji mere knowledge of the alphabet. Literacy is merely a means of education. The primary intention of education is to impart a training to children that enables them to concentrate and take the best work out of their senses. The child must learn to make good use of their hands and feet, nose and ears and other senses.

Gandhi wanted to bring about a fundamental revolution in the sphere of children's education. He had, from time to time, expressed his thoughts on how to achieve progress in it, what should be the pattern of education and what should constitute ideal education. Gandhi says: "I hold that the true education of the intellect can only come through a proper exercise and training of the bodily organs, e.g., hands, feet, eyes, ears, nose, etc., in other words, an intelligent use of the bodily organs in a child provides the best and quickest method of enhancing his intelligence. By spiritual training I mean education of the heart. He laid greater stress on spiritual education. He strove to improve the internal life more than the mere external"⁸ Gandhiji was of the opinion that guardians of children must never neglect the mental development of their wards. He says: "The development of body and mind did not take place in a coordinated manner and no awakening of the soul took place at the same time, one-sided development of either body or mind would take place. Spiritual education means the education of the heart. Such education could be carried out when proper and comprehensive development of the child's mind synchronized with the

training of its physical and spiritual power”.⁹ Gandhi placed a high value on the environment, but he also recognized that children depend on the quality of their inheritance. According to him, children inherit their parents’ traits in addition to their physical characteristics. Although the environment has a significant impact, a child’s initial foundation is passed down from its predecessors. I’ve always witnessed kids overcome the consequences of evil inheritance. This is because the soul’s basic quality is purity.¹⁰ “A wise parent permits the children to make errors,” he repeated. Burning their fingertips occasionally is beneficial to them. Real education should include teaching children that they can easily overcome hatred amid life’s challenges by love, violence by self-surrender, and untruth by truth.¹¹

In a speech delivered before the students of the Shamaldas College, Bhavnagar, Gandhi says: “The parents take the lead in giving the wrong direction. They feel that their children should be educated only in order that they may earn wealth and position. Education and knowledge are thus for the peace, innocence and bliss that the life of a student ought to be.”¹² In his statement, “The greatest lessons in life, if we would just stop and humble ourselves, we would learn not from grown up knowledgeable men but from the so-called ignorant children,” Gandhiji demonstrates his belief that children make the best teachers. We must start with children if we are to bring about true peace in our world and wage a true struggle against war.¹³

Gandhi felt that children should be brought up properly and kept healthy. He knew it well that the future would be in their hands and if they were not able and in good health how they could look after the affairs of the country effectively. Gandhi considered the bringing up of children is an art. He always wished that parents looked after children so well that they grew to be responsible and noble citizens of India as he considered them as the greatest asset of the nation.

He has restored the child to the legitimate place in the scheme of education. . He defines true education as bringing out the finest in a child or man—body, mind, and soul. For Gandhi mere literacy is not the end of education or even the beginning. It is merely one method of educating both men and women. Mere literacy, in his opinion, can never be the be-all and end-all of education. As a result, in his educational philosophy, literacy is not given much weight. He did not support the view of stuffing children’s minds with all kinds of information, without ever thinking of stimulating and developing them. Proper education of a child should be through manual work, not as a side activity, but as the prime means of intellectual training... Training in one special occupation will train up the child’s mind, body, his handwriting, his artistic sense, and so on.¹⁴ The development of students’ character should be the main goal of all education. His main emphasis is on the three H’s, i.e. head, heart and hand, rather than on the three R’s i.e. *reading, writing and arithmetic*. He laid equal stress on the education of heart, i.e. refinement of emotions and impulses and awakening of deepest feelings of love, sympathy and fellowship. It is a lifelong process. It ought to foster a sense of responsibility, cooperation, tolerance, and civic spirit.¹⁵

He thought that the earliest school for a child, where proper attitudes could be created and the foundations laid for strength of character, was the home. A child shouldn’t be forced to learn anything. Children should see education as play. Play is an essential part of education.

He holds that, as the largest part of our time is devoted to labour for earning our bread, our children must from their infancy be taught the dignity of such labour. Our kids shouldn't be indoctrinated to hate work.¹⁶ Gandhiji said, "Children absorb far more information with their ears and with less effort than through their eyes. I can't recall ever reading a book from beginning to end with my boys. But I gave them with, in my own language, all that I had digested from my reading various books, and I dare say they are still carrying a recollection of it in their minds. They found it difficult to recall the information they had learned from books, but they could easily repeat what I had taught them orally."¹⁷

He wanted therefore to begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training. He holds that the highest development of the mind and the soul is possible under such a system of education. The only requirement is that all handicrafts be taught scientifically, meaning that the child should understand the rationale behind each step rather than just mechanically, as is currently the case. Gandhiji stated that in response to children's curiosity in life's facts, "We should tell them if we know, and if we don't, acknowledge our ignorance. If it is something that must not be told, we should check them and ask them not to make put such question even to anyone else. We must never put them off. They know more things than we imagine. They attempt to learn the information in a dubious way if they are unaware and we choose not to tell them. However, we must assume this danger if it must be denied to them."¹⁸

Primary Education

In 1937, Gandhiji started a conversation about Indian educational issues in the Harijan columns and made numerous recommendations. The most important was the suggestion of primary education. Primary education, which he believed should be equivalent to the current matriculation without English, was given the utmost significance. He wanted that within the ages 7 and 14 there should be free, compulsory, universal primary education. He wanted the state should also accept the responsibility of providing pre-school education as and when their finances permit them to do the same. He firmly believed that basic education in India should be free and mandatory. According to him, the only way we can achieve this is by giving the kids a fulfilling career and using it to develop their mental, physical, and spiritual abilities.¹⁹

Primary education, according to his opinion is not that teaching the alphabet and reading and writing because it hampers the intellect growth. He would not teach them the alphabet till they have had an elementary knowledge of history, geography, mental arithmetic and the art (say) of spinning. Through these three he should develop their intelligence. Question may be asked how intelligence can be developed through the *takli* or spinning wheel. He considers it a marvelous process if it is not taught merely mechanically. He explains, "When you tell a child the reason for each process, when you explain the mechanism of the *takli* or the wheel, when you give him the history of cotton and its connection with civilization itself and take him to the village field where it is grown, and teach him to count the rounds he spins and the method of finding the evenness and strength of his yarn, you hold his interest and simultaneously train his hands, his eyes and his mind".²⁰ This preliminary training would be of six months. The child

is probably now ready for learning how to read the alphabet, and when he is able to do rapidly, he is ready to learn simple drawing, and when he has learnt to draw geometrical figures and the figures of the birds etc., he will draw, not scrawl the figures of the alphabet. He recalls the days of his childhood when he was being taught the alphabet. "I know what a drag it was. Nobody cared why my intellect was rusting. I consider writing as a fine art. By forcing young children to learn the alphabet at the start of their education, we destroy it. Therefore, when we try to teach a child the alphabet before its time, we harm the skill of writing and impede his development," he stated.²¹ His idea to use village handicrafts like spinning and carding to teach elementary school is therefore seen as the beginning of a quiet social revolution with the most profound effects.

It will give the city and the countryside a sound and moral foundation for their connection, which will help to eradicate some of the worst aspects of the current social insecurity and tainted class relations.²² According to Gandhiji, music needs to be included in the curriculum of elementary schooling.

Gandhiji is of the opinion that music should form part of the syllabus of primary education. So, he said, "I heartily endorse this proposition. Training the hand is just as important as learning to modulate the voice. To bring out the best in the boys and girls and pique their genuine interest in their education, physical exercise, handicrafts, sketching, and music should all be combined."²³ Gandhiji said, "The suggestion has often been made that in order to make education compulsory, or even available to every girl or boy wishing to receive education, our schools and colleges should become almost, if not wholly, self-supporting, not through donations or State aid or fees exacted from students, but through remunerative work done by the students themselves. This can only be done by making industrial training compulsory. This can only be done when our students begin to recognize the dignity of labour and when the convention is established of regarding ignorance of manual occupation a mark of disgrace".²⁴ Here we find Gandhiji as a gender sensitive educationist when he was suggesting of an equal opportunity of compulsory primary education for both boys and girls. At the same time an innovative solution has been prescribed by him to make self-reliant, self-financed schools and colleges and resultantly it will make the students independent.

Gandhiji's most absorbing passion was to work for the Indians. Of course, none were as dear to him as children. He loved children and loved them intensely. He was never happier than when he was with them. Distinguished visitors came to him were amazed to find that he could give so much time to the children around him. It is this great devotion and love that made him evolve a new type of education for this country. In spite of his busy life, he gave some time to his children; he talked to them and guided them. In the course of his conversations with the children were laid the foundations of his various experiments in education. The various experiments he made started with the training of his own children. Later on, he had opportunities to try out his ideals at the Sphinx Park, the Tolstoy Farm, the Champaran Schools, and Sabarmati Ashram and latterly in numerous other institutions that were started in pursuance of his scheme of basic education.

He found that the educational system that was imposed on the country was both the

cause and result of this national slavery. The system of education that prevailed then, it seemed to him, was curbing growth of the children, it killed their initiative. It made their school-life joyless. The teachers forced the children to an inactive, passive life, which destroyed their self-confidence and capacity to work. Gandhiji's love for children rebelled against this state of affairs. The one thought that troubled him most was how to combat this situation and do something to help the growth of children in the proper direction. He opined, "If we were to make a new nation, we had first to train our children. Habits are formed, confidence is instilled and strength of mind achieved while children are young".²⁵

Basic Education

"Mahatma Gandhi was teacher by conviction and goal. He aimed at the social transformation of India. This transformation required a change in the individual. It was for producing this change that Gandhiji forwarded his new system of education, known as "*Nai Talim*" or "Basic Education".²⁶ According to him, "Basic education links the children, whether of the cities or the villages, to all that is best and lasting in India. It develops both the body and the mind, and keeps the child rooted to the soil with a glorious vision of the future in the realization of which he or she begins to take his or her share from the very commencement of his or her career in school".²⁷

It became both a challenge and an opportunity for Gandhiji to devise a system of education, which would suit the Indian masses and give freedom of expression to our children. Gandhiji summoned a conference of distinguished educationists at Wardha to consider his ideas on the subject. A small committee²⁸ studied these ideas and though it was not able to accept everything, it substantially agreed with the basic ones, which he expounded. The Zakir Hussain Committee worked out the details. What came out of it has been called the Basic Education System.²⁹ India's problems were many and if they were to be tackled efficiently on a nationwide scale, Gandhi came to the conclusion that the education in our schools and colleges must be recognized on a sounder footing.

He wanted our children and our people to be trained for the highest ideals in life, and to that end he desired to establish a society based on self-discipline, love and service in which there would be no exploitation of one by another, but all would do their allotted work. He wanted a method of education in which children could be cheerful and could learn by doing. He loved our children passionately as he loved our country and out of this love and devotion to the child and country originated Basic Education. "Whatever may be true of other countries, in India at any rate where more than 80% of the population is agricultural and another 10% industrial, it is a crime to make education merely literary, and to unfit boys and girls for manual work in after life. Indeed, I hold that as the larger part of our time is devoted to labour for earning our bread, our children must from our infancy be taught the dignity of such labour. Our children should not be taught as to despise labour".³⁰

For all round development of boys and girls, training should as far as possible be given through a profit yielding craft and that education taken as a whole can and must be self-supporting. He said in *Young India*, 14.8.24, "When our children are admitted to schools,

they need, not slate and books, but simple village tools which they can handle freely and remuneratively. This means a revolution in educational methods". These suggestions were revolutionary in the field of primary education. All thinking men in Government and outside devoted their attention to these suggestions and devised a new plan of primary education known as Basic education which has now been accepted by the Government of India as the National pattern of Elementary education for the country.

According to Gandhiji literacy is not the end of education or even the beginning. It is only one of the means whereby men and women can be educated. Literacy in itself is not education. Hence, he opined, "I would, therefore, begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft, enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training. Thus, every school can be made self-supporting, condition being that State takes over the manufacture of these schools".³¹ Gandhiji wanted to see all the schools as self-supporting as far as possible. There were two main reasons why Gandhi advocated self-sufficiency for educational institutions. One was purely financial: namely, a poor society could not provide education to all its children unless schools could generate the resources and money to run them. The other was a political reason, which Gandhiji did not articulate as clearly as the first. Financial self-sufficiency alone could protect schools from dependence on the state and from interference by it. As values, both self-sufficiency and autonomy were close to Gandhiji's heart. For him, as for Tagore, a state system of education was a great contradiction. Gandhiji attempted to follow a system of schooling in which each school would be expected to develop the resources for its own maintenance.

On universal, free and compulsory education, he commented, "If we expect, as we must, every boy and girl of school going age to attend public schools, we have not the means to finance education in accordance with the existing style nor are millions of parents able to pay the fees that are at present imposed. Education to be universal must therefore be free. At the present moment we have not even tried on any large scale the experiment of free education. We have offered the parents no inducements. We have not even sufficiently or at all advertised the value of literacy. I am not even sure that the experiment in compulsory education has been uniformly successful wherever it has been tried".³²

The core of Gandhiji's proposal was the introduction of a productive handicraft in the school curriculum. The idea was not simply to introduce a handicraft as a compulsory school subject, but to make the learning of a craft the axis of the entire teaching programme. Gandhiji was the father of Basic Education, which was considered to be the action design for translating his philosophy into practice. The broad, individual and social goals of Basic Education is to provide education for life and through life to all children, so that they may acquire the capacity for self-reliance in every aspect of a clean, healthy and cultured life and also acquire an understanding of the social and moral implication of such a life. He also extended the scope of basic education of everybody at every stage of life. He said, "Our field is not merely the child of seven to fourteen years of age, the field of *Nai Talim* stretches from the hour of conception in the mother's womb to the hour of death."³³ *Nai Talim* or basic education was designed for four stages: Pre-Basic Education for children below 7; Basic Education for children of 7-14 age group; Post-Basic Education for children after Basic Education; and Adult Education for the

adults. The spread of Basic Education in free India has provided minimum education to the children, which is essential for the democracy in India. From the educational point of view Basic Education has the following major strengths.

First, Basic Education is child-centered and activity centered education where the natural interests of children reflect their need to understand the environment in which they find themselves and to find their own place in it. Their freely chosen activities show their impulse to learn, to construct experience, and to be absorbed in any occupation that satisfies their social interests and their urge to be creative and productive.

Second, Basic Education is dynamic and creative. It encourages the child to develop the scientific attitude of mind, independent thinking, and fair judgment. It helps the child to reason clearly and to apply the acquired experience to a new situation.

Third, Basic Education is cooperative and the real “school of work” where the children grow, learn and live together as a unit of family. To base education on real work, to aim at real production, means teaching children to work together.

Fourth, Basic Education is non-violent and sets truth and love in the highest place on which civilization rests. The most delicate task of education is to help the growing child to feel and respond to the claims of this absolute standard of goodness. Every child has to learn that his self-regarding and aggressive impulses must be sublimated and redirected to right work and good life.

Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to elementary education stands singularly unique. Before him many attempts were made to relate education to the needs of the society, but his ideas relating to new education made an unparalleled impact on the Indian education. His scheme gained the status of the national pattern of education. Gandhi's educational ideas are best understood and appreciated in the framework of his total philosophy of which two cardinal principles were:

(i) Truth and (ii) Non-Violence. The ultimate aim of Gandhian education was to create a systematic, a truthful and non-violent person. Truth, non-violence, service to humanity and fearlessness were the goals and education was the means to these. Character building was the most important function of education. Education was to develop skills in living and working and draw the best out of each individual. In a letter to his son Monilal, written from Volkstrust prison in 1909, he said, “education does not mean knowledge of letters but it means character-building”.³⁴

Gandhi always stressed that education must address itself to the development of the whole man-body, mind and spirit or the hand, the head and the heart. The whole man can be developed through a life-centered and problem-centered education. Integrated education can be provided, especially in the Indian rural context, through rural handicrafts. The end of all education is service.

The essential tenets of the system of education as propounded by Gandhiji are:

1. Education must serve the nation's needs, consistent with the philosophy of freedom, truth and non-violence.
2. It must promote equality of all religions and of all men.

3. It should give equal importance to intellectual training and manual work, which should be socially useful and productive.
4. The curricula and other arrangements should aim at serving the needs of villages or it should be self-supporting.
5. It should be free and compulsory primary education
6. It should be given in the mother-tongue.

These principles of education were the need of the age of the making of the nation. He proved himself very much practical in thinking when he said that the existing educational system was a fantasy. Because it does not correspond to the requirement of pauper India and there is no correspondence between the education that is given and the home life and the village life. According to him, that education is not national which takes no account of the starving millions of India and devises no means for their relief. Therefore, in his view, education must have the service motive behind it, besides the economic one.

He did not claim that his educational thought was a cure for all educational and social ills. It sought to create in all Indians an awareness to adopt a rational, realistic attitude towards their own freedom. Mahatma Gandhi's denunciation of the colonial system of educational reconstruction was a part of his total philosophy and strategy of freedom from colonialism and the upliftment of the people.³⁵

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi developed all his educational philosophy in his lifetime. All of his educational theories were practised in practical life. Equity was the basic ideology that he wanted to advocate in Indian social system. The main aim to be achieved, according to Gandhiji, is 'Sarvodaya', which means welfare of all without exception. He advocated the concept of equity in his educational planning rather than equality in Indian social order. Gandhiji emphasized the presence of peace in life in human society. According to Gandhi, "human ethics" should be learned by each and every student as it is very important for individual and social development. Gandhiji described his thought on education as "education for life, education through life, and education throughout life". According to him, a planned approach should be imbibed for the development of Indian social system, where education should be considered as the key agent of socio economic development. In the recent times the educational thinkers of India have started defining the educational tenets of India in the words of Mahatma Gandhi. The idea of Sarvodaya is the solution to many evils of modern society of India. The Indian thinkers of today have begun to emphasize the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, when they have started to inspire Indian students with the ideology based on the concept of personal purity and unselfish service for creation of a society based upon truth, love and non-violence. He advocated that knowledge and work should go hand in hand, should never be separated. This is the demand of the present day social life. Gandhiji advocated vocalization of education long back in 1937. This issue was given immense importance in the National Education Policy of 2020. In this sense, Mahatma Gandhi's educational thoughts especially his thoughts on child education has got a huge relevance in the present Indian society and education.

Gandhiji was not a great educationist in the orthodox sense of the term. But no one can deny his contribution towards education. He was a great teacher. He showed utmost innovativeness and resourcefulness in offering a scheme of education suited to Indian culture and heritage. Gandhian philosophy of education was traditional and modern at the same time. He himself said that the “fad”-Basic Education-has a sound “bottom” to it. Gandhiji’s ideas on child education should be studied by the educators of all over the world in detail and they should understand the key tenets of its philosophy and application.

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