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MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI (1869–1948)

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Rejection of the colonial education system, which the British administration had established in the early nineteenth century in India, was an important feature of the intellectual ferment generated by the struggle for freedom. Many eminent Indians, political leaders, social reformers and writers voiced this rejection. But no one rejected colonial education as sharply and as completely as Gandhi did, nor did anyone else put forward an alternative as radical as the one he proposed. Gandhi's critique of colonial education was part of his overall critique of Western civilization. Colonization, including its educational agenda, was to Gandhi a negation of truth and non-violence, the two values he held uppermost. The fact that Westerners had spent 'all their energy, industry, and enterprise in plundering and destroying other races' was evidence enough for Gandhi that Western civilization was in a 'sorry mess'.¹ Therefore, he thought, it could not possibly be a symbol of 'progress', or something worth imitating or transplanting in India.

It would be wrong to interpret Gandhi's response to colonial education as some kind of xenophobia. It would be equally wrong to see it as a symptom of a subtle revivalist dogma. If it were possible to read Gandhi's 'basic education' plan as an anonymous text in the history of world education, it would be conveniently classified in the tradition of Western radical humanists like Pestalozzi, Owen, Tolstoy and Dewey. It does not lend itself to be read in the context of the East-West dichotomy that Gandhi did deal with in some of his other writings. Yet the fact remains that Gandhi wanted education—reconstructed along the lines he thought correct—to help India move away from the Western concept of progress, towards a different form of development more suited to its needs and more viable, for the world as a whole, than the Western model of development.

Man versus machine

Gandhi was able to initiate an educational discourse outside the familiar East-West dichotomy yet forming part of the critique of the West by locating the problem of education in a different dialectic, that of man versus machine. In this dialectic, man represented the whole of mankind, not just India, and the machine represented the industrialized West. Throughout his life Gandhi had perceived his personal life and the causes he fought for in a global context. This perception was no less operative in the final decade of his life, at the beginning of which he presented his 'basic education' proposal.²

The core of Gandhi's proposal was the introduction of productive handicrafts in the school curriculum. The idea was not simply to introduce handicrafts as a compulsory school

subject, but to make the learning of a craft the axis of the entire teaching programme. It implied a radical restructuring of the sociology of school knowledge in India, where productive handicrafts had been associated with the lowest groups in the hierarchy of castes. Knowledge of the production processes involved in crafts, such as spinning, weaving, leather-work, pottery, metal-work, basket-making and book-binding, had been the monopoly of specific caste groups in the lowest stratum of the traditional social hierarchy. Many of them belonged to the category of 'untouchables'. India's indigenous tradition of education as well as the colonial education system had emphasized the skills (such as literacy) and knowledge of which the upper castes had a monopoly. In terms of its epistemology, Gandhi's proposal intended to stand the education system on its head. The social philosophy and the curriculum of 'basic education' thus favoured the child belonging to the lowest stratum of society. This is how it implied a programme of social transformation. It sought to alter the symbolic meaning of 'education' and thereby to change the established structure of opportunities for education.

The rationale Gandhi proposed for the introduction of production processes in the school was not as startling as this interpretation. The rationale he proposed was that schools must be self-supporting, as far as possible, for two reasons. One was purely financial: namely, that a poor society could not provide education to all its children unless schools could generate the physical and financial resources to run them. The other was political: that 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 Gandhi's heart. They belonged to his vision of a society based on truth and non-violence. Financial self-sufficiency was linked to truth, and autonomy to non-violence. An individual or an institution that did not participate directly in the process of production for survival could afford to adhere to 'truth' for long. Such an individual or institution would have to depend on the State to an extent that would make violence, in one form or another, inevitable. A State system of education was a contradiction of Gandhi's view of education. The possibility of the school developing the resources for its own maintenance showed a way out of this contradiction.

The idea of productive schools clearly came from the two communities Gandhi had established in South Africa. Phoenix Farm, started in 1904, and Tolstoy Farm, which was established in 1910, provided him with a lasting interest and faith in the potential of life in a rural commune. The first of these experiments was apparently inspired by John Ruskin's *Unto this last*. Gandhi drew three lessons from this book, or rather, as Louis Fischer has explained, Gandhi read three messages into the book.³ The first message was that the benefit of all is what a good economy is all about; the second was that earnings from manual work (such as that of a barber) have the same value as mental work (such as that of a lawyer); and the third one was that a life worth living was that of a labourer or craftsman. Gandhi recalls in his autobiography that he decided to put these messages into practice as soon as he had finished reading Ruskin's book on a train journey.

The kind of life that Gandhi's 'basic education' proposal projected as the 'good' life was first practised by him at Phoenix Farm and, somewhat more rigorously and ambitiously, at Tolstoy Farm a little later. As the name indicates, by the time of this latter experiment, Gandhi had read the works of, and had established contact with, the Russian writer and thinker Leo Tolstoy. The inspiration Gandhi received from Tolstoy spanned a wide range of interests and concerns. Prominent among them was to fight the sources of violence in human society. Tolstoy's celebration of the individual's right to live in peace and freedom, and his negation of all forms of oppression, brought him close to Gandhi. Even though Gandhi did not read Tolstoy's articles on education in the journal *Yasnaya polyana*, Tolstoy's view that 'education as a premeditated formation of men according to certain patterns is sterile, unlawful, and impossible'⁴ could well have been expressed by Gandhi.

The right to autonomy that Gandhi's educational plan assigns to the teacher in the context of the school's daily curriculum is consistent with the libertarian principles he shared with Tolstoy. Gandhi wanted to free the Indian teacher from the slavery of the bureaucracy. The schoolteacher's job had come to be defined under colonial rule as one transmitting and elucidating the forms and content of knowledge selected by bureaucratic authorities for inclusion in the prescribed textbook. Exposing the link between the mandatory use of textbooks and the feeble position of the teacher, Gandhi wrote: 'If textbooks are treated as a vehicle for education, the living word of the teacher has very little value. A teacher who teaches from textbooks does not impart originality to his pupils.'⁵ Gandhi's basic education plan implied the end of the teacher's subservience to the prescribed textbook and the curriculum. For one thing, it presented a concept of learning that could not be fully implemented with the help of textbooks. More important, however, was the freedom and authority that the basic education plan gave to the teacher in matters concerning the curriculum. It was a libertarian plan inasmuch as it denied the State the power to decide precisely what the teacher must do in the classroom. In accordance with his wider philosophy of social life and politics, this aspect of Gandhi's educational plan implied a dramatic reduction of the State's sphere of authority.

Self sufficiency

Having assembled a conceptual outline of Gandhi's plan, we can now return to its core concern and probe it more deeply. Basic education was an embodiment of Gandhi's perception of an ideal society as one consisting of small, self-reliant communities. To him, Indian villages were capable of becoming such communities; indeed, he believed that Indian villages were historically self-reliant, and the great task now was to restore their autonomy and to create the conditions necessary for economic self-sufficiency and political dignity in villages. Colonial rule, he thought, had damaged the village economy, subjecting it to exploitation by city-dwellers. Freedom from colonial rule would mean empowerment of the village and its development as a viable community. The basic education plan was meant to develop the village along these lines, by training children for productive work and by imparting to them attitudes and values conducive to living in a co-operative community.

This programme of development was rooted in Gandhi's view of industrialization as a threat to human sanity. Much debate has taken place about Gandhi's 'real' view of technology. It is not clear whether he was against the spirit of modern science and technology, or whether his opposition to Western-type modernity was confined to the manner in which science and technology had been used to exploit non-European societies. In the vast body of responses contained in his collected works, one finds ample evidence on both sides. Perhaps it is wrong to look for an either/or kind of position in Gandhi on this matter (and several others), for he was not so much a theorist of action as a person always ready to react and engage in action. Preparing for action by developing a symbolic model first was not his style. In the context of science and industrialization, he appears to have worked towards slowing down the march of capitalism and industrial development in India. He wanted India to develop socially and politically first, so as to be in a position of power to exercise options in the face of technological and market pressures coming from the industrialized West and from the capitalist lobby within Indian society.

His programme can be understood as a chronological ordering of priorities in which the consolidation of a viable political system would come first, and the development of productive processes through the use of machines would come second. According to Gandhi, a viable political system for India had to be centred on village republics, organized like 'oceanic circles'. The metaphor was meant to convey the principle of local power in

combination with commitment to the larger society. He wanted such a political system to develop before the modernization of the means of production so that the masses, who lived in villages, would not lack the power to protect their interests under the imperatives of modernization.⁶ His educational plan fits nicely in this ordering of priorities. If the march of industrialization could be slowed down and shaped in accordance with a plan for social and political progress, basic education could serve a definite purpose in such progress. More specifically, if purposeful industrialization meant protecting the right of villages to produce what they could without competition with large-scale mechanized establishments, basic education could enhance the productive capacities of village children under such a plan.

The ideal citizen in Gandhi's Utopia was an industrious, self-respecting and generous individual living in a small community. This is the image underlying his educational plan. This image of man and the production system sustaining it brings to mind the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), and it is useful to probe the similarities between the educational visions of these two contemporaries. Dewey grew up in a country whose frontiers were still developing. The small community of skilled, hard-working men and women, whose individual personalities mattered to the community, seemed the ideal democratic unit in Dewey's youth. The growing capitalist economy had not yet revealed the nature of politics and culture that it would demand. In his famous book, *Democracy and education*, published in 1916, Dewey had rooted his work-based model of teaching in the idealized small community of responsible individuals. Linking productive work with education was at the heart of Gandhi's model too, and it was rooted in the idealized village republic of his Utopia not much different from Dewey's. But whereas Dewey sketched his democratic community rather late in terms of his country's development along the path of capitalism, Gandhi sketched his ideal village community at a point when he thought there was still time to make choices. Furthermore, Dewey's plans were not as dependent on traditional craft-based production processes as Gandhi's were. Both, however, were products of the ethos of early capitalist development. In retrospect, Dewey's educational proposal reads like a plea for protecting a special space for children in the midst of rampant, dehumanizing, capitalist advancement. Gandhi's proposal, on the other hand, reads like a plea for delaying the growth of capitalism, for buying time to strengthen the capacities of men and women to live with machines.

If we take this comparison between Gandhi and Dewey a step further, we shall discover another similarity between the two educators: both propagated a purely secular pedagogy. This is indeed somewhat startling in the case of Gandhi because, in every sphere of action except education, Gandhi acted as a man with deep religious feelings. In the context of education too he seemed reluctant to commit himself to a purely secular position, but the fact remains that his basic education plan provides no room for religious teaching. In June 1938 he had to explain the matter in some detail because a delegation of educators demanded to know precisely what his view was on this matter. His answer was:

We have left out the teaching of religion from the Wardha scheme of education because we are afraid that religions as they are taught and practised today lead to conflict rather than unity. But on the other hand, I hold that the truths that are common to all religions can and should be taught to all children. These truths cannot be taught through words or through books—the children can learn these truths only through the daily life of the teacher. If the teacher himself lives up to the tenets of truth and justice, then alone can the children learn that Truth and Justice are the basis of all religions.⁷

Apparently, Gandhi resolved the conflict in his mind between the religious role of education in which he believed and the secular programme of basic education by upholding the moral image of the teacher. By arguing that the teacher can convey the basic truths of all religions—which are similar, he says—by practising them, Gandhi was surely making an extraordinary demand.

Whether the practical impossibility of the demand bothered him or not is a secondary matter. Most probably it did not, for he was used to overlooking the limitations—physical, intellectual or moral -within which ordinary people worked. And it is true that as a great educator active in politics he made many ordinary people do extraordinary things. The important thing for us to note is that by demanding the daily example of moral correctness in the teacher's conduct Gandhi was opting for a religious, as opposed to a purely professional, role for the teacher. Also, he was using a familiar Indian motif, that of guru living in his *ashram* in the company of his disciples. In the ideal *ashram* community, the teacher was expected to set an example of the life worth living, and from this high pedestal of daily existence he was permitted to demand any conceivable form of sacrifice from the students. This quasi-mythologized image seems to have served an important rhetorical function in Gandhi's plea for reform in education along the lines of his basic education proposal. It promised to place what was a modern concept of education and pedagogy within the halo of Indian tradition.

Opposition

This modest strategy, however, could not protect basic education from the attacks, indifference and undermining to which it was subjected from the beginning. The hostility that Gandhi's proposal faced cannot be separated from the political battles of the final decade of India's struggle for independence. Basic education was described as a 'Hindu ploy' by the leaders of the Muslim League in northern India. These critics chose to miss the secular character of Gandhi's plan. On the other hand, they paid exaggerated attention to a scheme that happened to synchronize with Gandhi's proposal and had some features similar to it. This other scheme was initiated by Ravi Shankar Shukla in the Central Provinces under the name of *Vidya mandir*, which literally meant 'temple of knowledge'. The rural schools Shukla wanted to start under this scheme and, more than that, the known absence of liberal, secular elements in his personality, made them vulnerable to attack. It was purely by metonymic logic that the attack covered Gandhi's original proposal. The attack found an audience wide enough to include members of the committee appointed by the Central Advisory Board of Education to discuss basic education in the perspective of State policy.⁸

Another perspective from which Gandhi's plan received suspicion and criticism was that of planning for industrial development in India. The basic education proposal coincided with the setting up of the National Planning Committee (NPC) by the Congress Party. The specific aim of the NPC was to formulate a plan for India's industrialization with the aim of 'economic regeneration' after independence. Its chairman, Jawaharlal Nehru, had believed for a long time that large-scale industrialization alone could solve India's problems of poverty and unemployment. But apart from Nehru's own beliefs, the NPC's reports on different spheres of development reflected the vision of a powerful and growing class of industrialists, their supporters in politics and intellectuals with high qualifications in different areas, including science and technology.

The projection of a centrally controlled economy and rapid expansion of large-scale industries in the NPC's reports could hardly have pleased Gandhi. He had been unhappy with the news of the NPC's meetings and work, and had said so. The conflict between Gandhi's view and the NPC's was not confined to the role and proportion of large-scale industries in the national economy; it extended to the rationale underlying industrial development. Apart from the material prosperity of India, the NPC's reports used India's security as a major rationale for the growth of heavy industries. Militarization and development were to go hand in hand, as in the West. This association was not something we might regard as cheerful rhetoric to please Gandhi.

The NPC's sub-committee on general and technical education did not acknowledge this conflict, perhaps because it was not necessary to talk about larger conceptual issues in the context of education. But the sub-committee's report showed great reluctance in recommending a shift from the existing system to the one suggested by Gandhi. It argued that there had been a sudden increase since 1938 in the efficiency of primary schools under the Congress ministries (the data provided to support this claim were confined to Bombay). 'It would, therefore, be wrong', the report said, 'to displace the movement by one in favour of basic education. The introduction of basic education should be a process of grafting it on to the elementary education possible.'⁹ Obviously, the sub-committee saw serious problems in the Wardha scheme of basic education. The major problem had to do with the importance given to the teaching of productive skills. The sub-committee's argument against this was that 'too much stress on vocation at such [an] age is spiritually harmful and teaching of general subjects through such [a] single narrow-down medium makes the knowledge of subject superficial and defective'.¹⁰ The other major objection was related to this first one. The idea that the output of children's work at school should financially sustain the school was unacceptable to the sub-committee. 'To a certain extent such a system will mean [the] existence of child labour in schools', the report said.¹¹

These were familiar arguments, and they were consistent with the general approach perspective adopted by the NPC. A broad, liberal curriculum for elementary education, and expansion of facilities for technical education, were the major thrusts of the recommended plan. Financial responsibility for compulsory primary education was assigned to be that of the State. This was indeed the staple of modernist thought, compared to which Gandhian ideas looked obsolete and conservative. In contrast to Gandhi's Utopia of village republics enjoying considerable autonomy but offering a modest standard of life dependent on rudimentary production processes, the modernist Utopia featured a strong centralized State responsible for building an industrial infrastructure in order to ensure a high standard of living for all. A liberal curriculum under State-supported arrangements for elementary schooling was part of the modernist vision. The pedagogical strengths of such a system were indicated by Nehru in one of his few reflections on education which figured at the end of a sub-chapter entitled 'The Congress and Industry', in *The Discovery of India*:

It is well recognized now that a child's education should be intimately associated with some craft or manual activity. The mind is stimulated thereby and there is a co-ordination between the activities of the mind and the hands. So also the mind of a growing boy or girl is stimulated by the machine. It grows under the machine's impact (under proper conditions, of course, and not as an exploited and unhappy worker in a factory) and opens out new horizons. Simple scientific experiments, peeps into the microscope and an explanation of the ordinary phenomenon of nature bring excitement in their train, an understanding of some of life's processes, and a desire to experiment and find out instead of relying on set phrases and old formulae. Self-confidence and the co-operative spirit grow, and frustration, arising out of the miasma of the past, lessens. A civilization based on ever-changing and advancing mechanical techniques leads to this. Such a civilization is a marked change, a jump almost from the older type, and is intimately connected with modern industrialization.¹²

There can be little doubt that, while writing these words, Nehru was engaging in a dialogue with Gandhi's basic education plan. He starts by agreeing with the main pedagogical assumption underlying basic education, namely that a craft or manual activity stimulates the child's mind. Then, by the force of analogy between craft and machine, he goes off along another argument that challenges the main economic assumption underlying basic education, without identifying it. The starting point of a dialogue with Gandhi's proposal turns, after two sentences, into a statement regarding the pedagogical value of scientific experiments and the relation such experiments have with an industrial civilization. Nehru was, of course, correct in pointing out this relationship, and also in stressing the enormous role that an experiment-based

pedagogy of science could play in revitalizing education in India. He shared the hope of such revitalization with many Indian intellectuals who were committed to rapid modernization and who found Gandhi's educational plan unacceptable. One of them was the well-known novelist Mulk Raj Anand, who wrote in his book *On education* published at the time of independence:

The dream of perfecting good little minds on the basis of Khadi and non-violence, so that these morons vegetate within the limits of their self-sufficient communities, is not only impossible in an India where every village is already inundated with cheap machine-made goods produced by foreign and indigenous capitalists, but is likely to bring about the very opposite of all those qualities which the Mahatma seeks to create in the average Indian.¹³

Clearly, from the modernists' point of view, Gandhi's plan was an invitation to take India backward. Furthermore, they believed that modernization of children's education (to the extent of providing microscopes in elementary schools) could be accomplished within the foreseeable future with the help of available resources.

Implementation

Not all responses to Gandhi's scheme of education were hostile. Many eminent educators welcomed basic education, and they prepared extensive plans to implement it. As might be expected, the ways in which Gandhi's idea was interpreted differed widely. At one extreme were educators and leaders who understood the scheme in the context of progressive educational thought associated with thinkers like Pestalozzi and Dewey. At the other extreme were those who lived by the letter of Gandhi's thoughts and who saw basic education as a fixed charter, a matter of orthodoxy. The fact remains that despite this range in the interpretations that Gandhi's proposal received, and despite imaginable administrative and financial problems, the scheme of basic schools was implemented on a considerable scale in several parts of India after independence. It is customary to look back at this implementation as a big failure, a conclusion that may not appear to be particularly sound if examined in the light of historical circumstances. But that is another story. The only fact that ought to be recorded here is that the implementation of Gandhi's plan could not survive the 'development decade' of the 1960s when the Indian economy and its politics entered into a new phase featuring the penetration of Indian agriculture by the advanced economies of the West and the centralization of power.

Notes

1. M.K. Gandhi, *The problem of education*, p. 164, Ahmedabad, Navajivan, 1962.
2. For a collection of Gandhi's speeches and articles on basic education, see *Educational reconstruction*, Wardha, Hindustan Talimi Sangh, 1938. See also Gandhi's speech at the Wardha Conference on 22 October 1937 in T.S. Avinashilingam, *Gandhiji's Experiments in Education*, Delhi, Ministry of Education, 1960.
3. Louis Fischer, *The life of Mahatma Gandhi*, London, Granada, 1982 (first published 1951).
4. Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy on education*, p. 111, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1968.
5. In *Harijan*, 9 September 1939.
6. See Gandhi's speech at Nagpur in 1938 to a group of visiting economists, in *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*; vol. 68, p. 258, Ahmedabad, Navajivan, 1977.
7. M.K. Gandhi, *Documents on social, moral and spiritual values in education*, p. 20, New Delhi, NCERT, 1979.
8. Bureau of Education, *Post-war educational development in India*, 3rd ed., Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1944. (report of Central Advisory Board of Education.)

9. National Planning Committee, *General education and technical education and developmental research*, p. 58, Bombay, Vora, 1948. (Reports of Sub-Committees series.)
10. Ibid., p. 140.
11. Ibid., p. 142.
12. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The discovery of India*, p. 416. London, Meridian Books, 1960 (first published in 1946).
13. Mulk Raj Anand, *On education*, p. 20, Bombay, Hind Kitab, 1947.

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