

# Gandhi on Education: An Overview

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## Abstract

**Gandhi's contribution in the sphere of education has been important. Education was a major component in the ideal state that he envisaged. It is for the reason that the constructive programme that Gandhi presented had education as one of its main ingredients. Within the overall context of his constructive programme, Gandhi believed the main pillar is education. He emphasized a system of education that would make the student alive to the importance of being self sufficient. In his view education should inculcate within the student the necessary view points of independence creativity and healthy criticism.**

**Keywords: Basic Education, Higher Education**

## Introduction

Education is the art of relating the development of the child to the needs of the nation, of making the youth of the country suitable parts of the mechanism of society. Each child that is born is not exclusively parental property, or the support-system of the family, but is in fact the asset of the entire nation, and so its training must naturally be geared to the needs and ideals of the whole nation.<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi was very emphatic in his assertion that in a nation where three-fourths of the population is engaged in agriculture, and about ten percent in various industries – to make education a mere literary exercise would, in their post-school lives, make boys and girls unsuited for any manual work. As most of our adult lives are geared towards the earning of a livelihood, it is necessary that we teach our children the importance of manual work since childhood. There should be no reason why a farmer's son, after passing out from school should, instead of working with dignity at his profession, become indolent and a good-for-nothing.<sup>2</sup>

Gandhi's contribution in the sphere of education has been important. Education was a major component in the ideal state that he envisaged. It is for this reason that the Constructive Programme that Gandhi presented had education as one of its main ingredients. Gandhiji was well aware of the fact that any improvement or change in any sphere of human endeavour can be possible only through the means of education. The right kind of education is only inculcates the spirit of devotion to the nation, but also builds character. It draws out the best in child and man in body, mind and spirit.

The value of education is not to be assessed in the same manner as we would assess the value of landed property, or any other such material things. The primary aim of education should be the development of all facets of the individual's personality and is not to be equated at all with the capacity to earn more and more money.

Being able to read and write, though important, should never be the sole end-product of education. What literacy should really mean is the all-round development of the individual. Not learning and repetition by rote, but rather the development of an inquisitive and questioning mind, is what education should be all about.

Good teaching is always a two-way process between the teacher and the taught. A good teacher shall always be one who is open to receiving as much as he is ready to give.

Gandhi's views on education had a multi-dimensional character. The kind of ideal society that he had in mind could only be built upon a system of education that was original, and not drawn from western educational ideas. He always thought that true education is one that generates an awareness in the individual of one's responsibilities and duties towards society and the nation.

Gandhi's return to India and Indian ways after a stay of almost 21 years in South Africa convinced him of the degenerate status of Indian society. Unless the country was revitalized and reborn, it could neither win nor sustain its independence. Accordingly, he worked out a comprehensive syllabus of nation regeneration, appropriately naming it the Constructive Programme. It was typically Gandhian in its content, and covered various areas of life, such as communal unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition, Khadi, village industries, village sanitation, new or basic education, adult education, uplift of women, education in health and hygiene, propaganda of Rashtra Bhasha, love of one's own language, Kisan Labour and students.<sup>3</sup>

Within the overall context of his constructive programme, Gandhi believed the main pillar is education. He emphasized a system of education that would make the student alive to the importance of being self-sufficient, at the same time generating within him the capability of becoming thus self-sufficient. In his view education should inculcate within the student the necessary view-points of independence, creativity and healthy criticism. The scheme of education that Gandhi proposed may be rightly classified into the twin components of 'Basic Education' and 'Higher Education'.

### **Basic Education:**

This education is meant to transform village children into model villagers. It is principally designed for them. Basic education links the child, whether from the city or the village, to all that is best in India.<sup>4</sup>

Gandhi considered it essential that the education system should be moulded in accordance with the requirements of the country. He suggested that primary and secondary education should be village oriented. It should enable the student to develop within himself the spirit of service to the village and the community.

The very initial stage of education should be oral, with emphasis on varied subjects such as history, geography, addition, spinning etc., rather than being textbook oriented. As already started earlier, the development of an inquisitive and questioning mind, and not bookish knowledge, must be emphasized. The small child's mind should not be unduly burdened by the alphabet and other such formal curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

Primary and secondary education should incorporate, along with formal teaching of various subjects, the learning of a craft which, according to Gandhi, should be the centerpiece of the entire teaching programme. It meant that the sociology of school knowledge in India be restructured, with linkage of productive handicrafts to the lowest groups in the hierarchy of the caste system. Hitherto,

knowledge of the various production processes involved in crafts had been the monopoly of specific caste groups in the lower strata of traditional social set-up. Many of these belonged to the untouchable classes. India's own tradition of education, as well as the colonial education system, had emphasized formal literacy and the acquisition of knowledge, to which the upper castes had a clear monopoly.

Gandhi's proposal meant the complete overturn of the education system as prevailing until now, standing it, so to say, upon its head. His concept of 'Basic Education' favoured the child belonging to the lowest stratum of society. It thus implied a programme of social transformation. It meant a complete alteration of the symbolic meaning of education, and a change to the hitherto established structure of opportunities for education. Gandhi's proposal to include productive handicrafts in the school curriculum had the objective of the making schools self-supportive. This would ultimately have the effect of provision of education for each child; also, financial independence of the schools meant that they shall also be free from political interference. This would in the ultimate analysis make for self-sufficiency and autonomy. Thus was combination of Swaraj and Swadeshi.

Gandhi opined that manual and productive work is as important as mental work.

According to Gandhi, the tenure of basic education should be at least 7 years, which may be extendable as per requirement. The medium of imparting knowledge should be in the vernacular appropriate to the regional location, and, as far as possible, the study of the English language should not be made compulsory.

Gandhi maintained that education should encourage the development of a secular outlook in the student, and must not lean in favour of or against any specific religion. He considered the education of women to be an important part of the entire literacy process. Women shall thus become equal partners in the fight for Swaraj, and be honoured Comrades in the mission of service.<sup>6</sup>

Gandhi said that his schemes of Basic Education would be a contributory factor in the development of both the individual and society. In his view, his plan of Basic Education shall bring about a silent social revolution. It shall impart a healthy and moral foundation to village-city relationship, and shall be the foundation of more just social set-up wherein there shall not be any division of society into the have and have-nots. Every individual shall have the minimum means for a decent living. The most important point about it is that this revolution shall be accomplished in a creative manner, without bloodshed and the investment of expensive means. Gandhi developed his ideas on education within the context of the need for machine-free society.<sup>7</sup>

### **Higher Education:**

Higher Education too was an essential component of Gandhi's educational philosophy. His variety of higher education was different from western education. Gandhi developed his ideas on higher education keeping in view the requirements of India, so that a happy and balanced India is born.

Gandhi said that he is not opposed to higher education, but he is definitely opposed to the kind of higher education that is being imparted. In his scheme of education there shall be a greater number of, and better equipped, libraries, laboratories and research centres. We shall thus have a vast army of engineers, doctors, chemists and experts of other subjects, who shall be dedicated and honest servants of the nation. And what is more, these experts will not speak English but rather the language of masses.<sup>8</sup>



In the area of higher education, Gandhi expressed his ideas regarding Technical and Engineering Colleges, Agriculture Universities, Medical Education, Humanities and medium of instruction.

The expenses on higher education should not be borne by the state. The expenses incurred on technical and engineering studies should in fact be borne by the industrial houses, because the products of such technical and engineering colleges are really being prepared for service in these industrial houses.

Agriculture Universities should be run on a self-financing basis. The education imparted in these universities should, of necessary, be geared to actual agricultural production. Such universities would, therefore, be in a position to meet their expenses through their own activities. Medical colleges and universities should be affiliated to selective hospitals. As the service of these hospitals shall be utilized mainly by the rich and affluent of the society, they will voluntarily meet such expenditure.

Gandhi thought that the institutions imparting knowledge in the humanities give only very perfunctory instruction in this discipline, which is distinct from any kind of technical skill. He highlighted that as many such institutions are already being run by private organizations, their establishment and running should be done by the state.

As regards the medium of education, Gandhi was a firm believer in the imparting of instruction not in the language of the Englishman, but rather in the mother tongue. As 'Hindustani' is the language that is still preferred by the majority, it should become the language of instruction.<sup>9</sup>

An analysis of Gandhi's views on various aspects of higher education makes it clear that he considered it only right that the expenses attendant on imparting such technical education should be borne by the organization and industrial houses for which the products of such institutions shall ultimately work. This will ensure that the state is not unduly burdened by the expenses towards such education. Also, sufficient number of educated and trained young men and women shall be made ready for working in various industrial houses and organizations. An analysis of Gandhi's views on education brings out the fact that though he was not educationist in the traditional sense, he delineated a clear viewpoint and practical outline of education. He defined education as the most certain means to an all-round development of mankind.

Not many people might be aware that Gandhi was a shy and a mediocre student and completed his school education with every average results He read little, and only what was practically relevant. Thought had no meaning for him unless it was lived out, and life was shallows unless it reflected a carefully thought-out vision of life. But when an idea griped his imagination, he gave all his attention to it.<sup>10</sup> We can now begin to form an idea of the absolute importance that education had for Gandhi in his scheme for an independent and 'Indian India' – 'Swaraj' and 'Swadeshi'. He was possessed of enormous self-confidence, and had implicit belief in the practicality and applicability of his views on education.

The imperatives of the challenges before India and, in fact, the whole world, raise again and again the relevance of Gandhi and Gandhism. Whenever Gandhism is pushed into the orbit of the questioning of its fruitfulness, his ideas and their utility in new context shine forth. Gandhi himself maintained that the relevance of his ideas should be judged in the context of changing times and circumstances. Even though Gandhi was not a traditionalist in education, a big part of his ideas is relevant even today, and therefore eternal.



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