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Gandhian Scheme Of Primary Education And Its Implications For Child Labour

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Abstract

Children are at the core of the Gandhian philosophy of truth, nonviolence, Sarvodaya ,i.e., social welfare for all and Nai Talim. To quote Gandhi, 'If we are to teach real peace in this world we shall have to begin with the children'. Gandhi recognized the need to understand childhood and child rights which are embedded in the cultural context of the society as he gives an alternative to the western system of education. His concept of education tries to draw out the best in a child through harmonious coordination of all the human faculties and their adjustment with the outer world. There are references in his writings which imply that Gandhi was against children working for wages for they should be attending schools. For children in school, Gandhian concept of education includes manual work involving skill and labour. He writes that it would develop in the child, his hands, brain and soul as Nai Talim would aim at work experience through early school stage and later through vocation in the secondary level. Does such a philosophy of education and dignity approve of child labour? The paper argues that Gandhi's concept of education tries to draw out the best in a child through harmonious coordination of all the faculties and their adjustment with the outer world. At the same time, manual labour being the core of Nai Talim at school whose products can be sold out to finance the education brings in an environment which is conducive for the practice of child labour. In the light of above, the paper tries to understand the implications of the Gandhian scheme of education for child rights in contemporary India. It also attempts to implicitly understand as to what extent the dehumanizing effect of modern civilization on the lives of children be countered by Gandhian values underlying Nai Talim.

Introduction

Nai Talim emerged as a revolutionary idea of primary education system in pre independent India. It was visualized as the sole viable solution to eradication of mass illiteracy in a context of extreme poverty and colonial bondage. Its self supporting structure, at the same time, also envisioned an environment which could be conducive for the growth and perpetuation of child labour. A spillover from colonial era, the problem of child labour thrives in independent India despite constitutional commitments, legal abolition and introduction of compulsory primary education. The evolution of legal framework is based on the premise that oscillates from recognition of child's needs to that of their rights. On the one hand, it is recognized that state and society cannot assume the role of a silent spectator to the fact that working children from poor family background abdicated their right to a normal childhood and education and are denied proper moral and material development. On the other hand, it is argued that poor children cannot be stopped from earning wages which is crucial for their survival. Gandhi's concept of childhood with corresponding rights and duties tries to balance the two opposing positions as is reflected in his scheme of education which is based on the principle of coordination of both, body and mind, for the development of the soul of the child. Himself being a 'child of nonviolence', Gandhi recognizes a need to understand childhood

and child rights which are embedded in the cultural context of the society and gives an alternative to the western system of education which is based on western notion of childhood.

Western Notion of Childhood :A Contested Concept

Defining 'childhood' has been a challenging endeavour for the social scientists. Generally, The age criteria is used, in formal and legal definition which is based on the dual distinction of a 'child' as non- adult, and , of an 'adult' as non-child (White,2009).Sometimes, attempts are made to dichotomise what is termed as 'harmless child work' and 'harmful child labour' while bringing out different dimensions of childhood.Whether children should be made to work as part of their upbringing, has also been a contentious issue . The children are also not seen as a homogenous group except regarding a few features, like dependence on others for survival, and gradual development of their capacity to self manage.Sociological theories see 'child hood' as a social phenomenon and emphasize the role of child rearing practices in the transformation of irrational, dependent and immature children into competent, mature and autonomous adults.

What comprises legitimate activities in childhood have changed over span of human history. In the hunting - gathering societies ,children up to the teenage played a minimal role in the economic activities . With the beginning of settled agrarian society some 10,000 years ago, there appeared a reconsideration of children's utility and thus 'work' became integrated part of 'childhood' in most agrarian societies. This practice continued for a longer period even in post agrarian societies as we see this legacy being reflected in the modern western school calendars, synchronising spring and summer vacations with the planting and harvesting needs, for which juvenile's hands are required(Stearns, 2006).Demands for agricultural work also promoted new kinds of gender differentiation among children with agrarian societies slowly moving towards patriarchal norms. The exploitation of children started in new form in capitalist societies for long till public consciousness and democratic demands led state to intervene and legislate against such exploitative practices such as child labour and child slavery. Contemporary western societies have differentiated between 'harmless child work' and harmful 'child labour' and efforts have been made to wean away children from exploitative labour market. There emerged a dichotomy between child work for learning purpose and child work for economic gains.There is a very thin divide between 'child work' and 'child labour' in modern world.In practice we find that the working children are very much in existence in the labour markets of developed world today, despite the fact that spread of education and legislative intervention have ended full time child employment in industries and elsewhere in developed countries. Still, a large number of teenage children in modern developed societies of the United Kingdom, the United States of America and the Netherland have experiences of seasonal labour markets.

Besides, the western/ European concept of childhood considered as the universal model of child development has been challenged by many social scientists . Based on cross-cultural studies , they have an alternative understanding of 'childhood'.Rogoff has argued that childhood dependency is partly a natural phenomenon and that the sequence ,and the timing, of the development of a child's specific competencies are highly dependent on cultural contexts (Rogoff,2003). According to Margaret Mead, the childhood and the youth are 'social and cultural construction' (Mead,1928) To many of such social scientists, the western view of childhood seems to understand children as 'objects' rather than as 'social subjects' who can be their own agents of development and the western notion also view them as 'the emotionally 'priceless' but economically 'useless' child'(White,2009).Child is seen as an object of affection.But, such an interpretation excludes children from the sphere of socially relevant work(Liebel, 2004) or even from works of productional value(Nienwenhuys, 1996). The alternative view understands children as an agent of their own development who should not be debarred from earning if need so be.The notion of seeing children as 'social subjects' is implicit in understanding of children's rights as human rights, which go beyond the rights to protection and right to participation and include right to good education , protection from exploitation as well as right to work and earn money if they need to ,as established in the United Nations Convention on Rights of Child,1989(UNCRC). The sociological notion of normal and appropriate childhood is ,thus, a deviation from the universal western model of childhood.

Gandhi's view on childhood and role of education

Gandhi's views on child rights and consequently on child labour is very much embedded in his own understanding of childhood and child development which is very much in concomitant with his ideal of the nation. Gandhi's concept of 'childhood' is also a deviation from the western universal model of childhood and has unique connotation.His assumptions are based on the basic question of the purpose and place of a child in development of a nation and civilization.Nonviolence and peace are the goals ,a child should aspire, for which he has to develop 'soul force'A child should develop the soul force through proper training based on coordination of body and mind.

His scheme of education acquires significance in making a child attain his or her 'soul force'. Gandhi criticized the existing education system based on western concept of childhood. He writes, such system does not train individual to become useful and productive members of society. Need is for more constructive and humane system which will be better integrated with needs and ideals of national life and better be able to meet its pressing demands. Any scheme of education designed for Indian children would radically differ from western system as the Indian nation has adopted non-violence as the method of peace and for achieving all-round freedom. Children need to be taught the superiority of non-violence over violence.

For Gandhi, the problem of society and of the world is in essence, the problem of individual. Gandhi wrote, 'The world will live in peace only when the individuals comprising it make up their minds to do so.' It means that the individual should attain a state 'when mind and body and speech are in proper coordination.' (Young India, 1.10.1931, pg. 287). Hence, he conceptualises Nai Talim as been presented in the Wardha Educational Conference of 1937, which was presided over by Dr Zakir Husain. The core of Gandhian Nai Talim is its pedagogy which is handicraft-centric and based on coordination of body and mind. Gandhi writes, 'I hold that true education of the intellect can only come through a proper exercise and training of the bodily organs, i.e., hands, feet, eyes, ears, nose, etc.' In other words, an intelligent use of the body organs in a child provides the best and quickest way of developing his intellect. Unless the development of mind and body goes hand in hand with a corresponding awakening of the soul, the development of child would prove to be a poor lop sided affair. Hence, his scheme of Education is very innovative which is in sync with his entire philosophy.

Gandhi's Scheme of Education and the issue of child development

For Gandhi, if civilization is to improve and body politic is to get rid of violence in the form of war and revolution, the individual must purge themselves of violence through self discipline. Since individual is the basic unit, it is by educating him/her in the value of nonviolence that the world peace can be established. Such education must consist of training of body, mind and senses.

The basic idea of his scheme, as propounded in Harijan and presented in the Wardha Educational Conference is that education based on sound principles should be imparted through some craft or productive work, which should provide the nucleus of all the other instructions provided in the school. The following may be chosen as basic craft in various schools: a) spinning, b) carpentry, c) Agriculture, d) fruit and vegetable gardening, e) leather work, f) Any other craft for which local and geographical conditions are favorable. Such reasonable skills would also enable the child to pursue it as an occupation after finishing his full course.

Gandhi counts many merits in such scheme of education for children. Psychologically, it relieves child from tyranny of a purely academic and theoretical instruction against which child's active nature is always making a healthy protest. The child acquires apart from superficial literacy, i.e., capacity to learn and write, a far more important capacity of using hand and intelligence for some constructive purpose which amounts to 'literacy of the whole personality'. Thus, Knowledge becomes related to life.

Secondly, Gandhi had said that every handicraft has to be taught not mechanically but scientifically, with emphasis on cooperative activities, planning, accuracy, initiative and individual responsibility in learning. In the process, the participation by all children will tend to break down the existing barriers of prejudice between the manual and intellectual workers and cultivate in true sense 'the dignity of labour and human solidarity-an ethical and moral gain of incalculable significance'.

Analyzing the Gandhian understanding of education in above perspective of dual significance, i.e., purpose of Nai Talim being 'literacy of whole personality' and 'breaking down the prejudice between the intellectual and manual labor', one sees Gandhian attack at the root of the social stratification of Indian society. Caste system - the main organizing principle of Indian Society validates hierarchy and the ridge between manual and intellectual labour which Gandhi tries to nip in the bud through his scheme of Nai Talim.

SALIENT FEATURES OF GANDHIAN SCHEME OF EDUCATION

Briefly, the basic dimensions of Nai Talim implies five fundamental features in accordance with their importance in the scheme as per follows:

- 1) Elementary education be centred around productive and manual work through some kind of craft. Spinning yarn through Takli was his favorite.
- 2) Self supporting to cover teachers' salary
- 3) Compulsory and free education for seven years
- 4) Education should be imparted through mother tongue
- 5) Doctrine of non violence is the ethical feature of the scheme.

The first and the second features attracted a number of criticism in the Wardha conference itself. It raised concerns about child slavery and also brought the issue of child labour. KT Shah, the most vocal critique of Gandhian scheme of education had compared the manual labour by children in school to those of bonded labour working in plantations of Sri Lanka.

Analyzing Gandhian scheme, one finds that Gandhi emphasizes more on pedagogy, i. e., how to acquire education. Knowledge and child development is automatic corollary of this. Hence, the core of Nai Talim is scientific learning through a craft, as it is only through manual work that the intellect of a child can be developed. Crafts should be at the centre of syllabus and it should not be taught as a supplementary discourse. Child must grasp all the branches of knowledge such as geography, science, arithmetic, history, language, painting and music through the learning process of the handicraft of his or her choice. Gandhi writes, 'I want that the whole education should be imparted through some handicraft or industry. Handicrafts be taught not merely for productive work, but for developing the intellect of the pupils'. (Gandhi, 1937) For Gandhi puts great emphasis on manual work as to him, development of mind comes through manual training. However, the controversy emerges when Gandhi further states that manual training will not result in producing articles for school museums or toys with no value, rather it should produce marketable articles (Gandhi, 1937). The production of marketable articles by children in school would aid in his or her education, thus, bringing in Gandhian self supporting scheme in Nai Talim.

The self supporting education for Gandhi had two meanings, i.e., education that will help one to be self supporting in later life, and education which in itself is self supporting. Learning through crafts amounts to vocational training, thus, the new education is a solution to the problem of unemployment. Gandhi writes that the child after finishing a seven years course should be discharged as an earning unit (Harijan, 1937).

Secondly, Gandhi says that craft if taught efficiently and thoroughly should enable the school to pay towards the cost of teaching staff. To him, good education will cover the major portion of its running costs. Education would be self supporting so far as recurring expenditure in running the school is concerned. This includes the remuneration of teachers. The expenditure on land, building and equipment will be born by the state which will be responsible for supervising and coordinating the activities of schools. Gandhi suggested that the state should guarantee to take over at market price the product of the work done by children in schools. 'Every school, can be made self supporting, the condition being that the state takes over the manufactures of these schools' (Harijan, July 31, 1937). According to Gandhi, this would help the state in introducing the scheme of free and compulsory basic education that would reach the masses.

As self supporting education for Gandhi also meant meeting expenses of the teachers' salaries through the manual and productive work of the children, he delineates a detailed and extensive plan. According to him, if a student works at a vocation for four hours a day and taking the rate of remuneration two pice per day and the number of working days in a month to be 25 days, he or she would be earning Rs 3-2-0 per month for the school. Calculating for seven years of compulsory education, the education can be self supporting for the salaries of the teachers will be paid with the manual work of children in the school. The efficiency of a Sewagaon school meant that about seven classes with 25 pupils on average and 8 or 9 members on the staff should be able to earn the annual salaries of the staff from products manufactured in the school as the minimum salaries of teacher ranges between rs20 to rs 25 (Sri Mushruwala, 1937)s

Gandhi rationalized the 'self supporting' feature of primary education in terms of the poverty of the country, inability of a poor country like India to find the crores of rupees needed to introduce free and compulsory education for the millions of her children. The British government were interested in creating lower rungs of government servants, accordingly introduced the secondary and higher education system in India. The colonial administration was not interested in investing for mass education at elementary level. The elections were held in 1937 under Government of India Act, 1935 and congress ministries were formed in 7 provinces. One of the major agenda of congress government was to introduce the compulsory primary education and the major challenge was how to overcome the scarce financial resources at their disposal. Hence, Gandhi rationalized his scheme of self supporting education in this context. Given the extreme poverty of India under colonial rule, Gandhi could see this feature of Nai Talim as a sole path to implementation of compulsory primary education for masses of India.

Implications of Gandhian Scheme of Education and the issue of child rights in Contemporary Context

There emerges pertinent questions regarding child rights with Gandhian scheme of education, especially in the changed context of independent India with welfare state and state funding of primary education. The question on the relevance of the Gandhian scheme of education becomes imperative.

There is a danger that in the working of this scheme, the economic aspect will be stressed at the sacrifice of the cultural and educational objectives. Teachers may devote most of their attention and energy to extracting the maximum amount of labour from children while neglecting the intellectual, social and moral implications and possibilities of craft training. This scheme of education might revive child labour and child exploitation in disguised form. A voice of dissent was raised by Prof Shah at the Wardha conference, who had said that the necessity to find money for educational purposes has driven Gandhi to introduce labour and slavery into schools and thus turn them into factories. He further accuses that self supporting education will create in the child from the very beginning a feeling of exchange motive which is undesirable. If one involves a child of 7 years in economic mud-dles, a kind of slavery would creep in (Shah, 1937). Gandhi counters that none becomes slave at parents' home by working for 7 hours, so the question of slavery should not arise for working in schools. Further, vocational training in schools automatically saves schools from degenerating into factories.

In post independent India, education became a primary agent of social change. It became the responsibility of the state to frame and implement universal primary education and gradually Right to Education became a fundamental right in 2009. Simultaneously, under the pressure of civil society groups largely, the issue of working children, their pitiable condition at labour market caught the attention of policy makers. The constitution of India banned child labour in hazardous industries, it was in 2016 that complete legal ban on child labour was executed. Despite these state interventions, the rights of children to education is being violated in practice and India continues to be child labour intensive state. Small children at labour market are exposed to all kinds of hazards and exploitative practices. Like other states, education was conceived as the solution to the problem of violation of child rights. The basic idea which emerged was based on the innate relationship between the child rights and the education, which became the hallmark of basic childhood. The question emerged - whether a child should be left at the vagaries of labour market or should he/she be placed compulsorily at school? The Indian state over the years has evolved the policy of weaning away children from labour market and placing them in schools, for which a number of schemes and legislations were made and put in force.

Gandhian scheme of education where manual work is at the centre of learning and the product of manual work is salable which would be used for supporting finances for running of schools, has been put aside with state financing the school education in a big way. The concept of Gandhian childhood is also overlooked in favor of western notion whereby a child is viewed as 'emotionally priceless' and economically 'useless'. Though vocational training in schools has emerged as eye-catcher, but its link to market has not been encouraged. For Gandhi, the central core of 'learning by doing' method is handicrafts where as they are seen as supplementary learning practice in modern schools.

In contemporary era, the solution for end of child exploitation in labour market is based on the assumptions that the compulsory school education up to the age of fourteen years will enable child to grow and develop into a good citizen. There is no requirement for a child to do manual work for sale in the school unlike Gandhian scheme of education in which such labour was seen as an integral part of the growth of child. For Gandhi, end to exploitation of children in labour market was sought through putting them in school and making them learn and earn through the labour which they were supposed to put while learning through the practice of handicrafts. Killing two birds with one shot, children were being educated on one hand and self supporting their education on the other. In modern world education of child and their need to work for sustenance are seen as two separate activities, antithetical to one another. Either a child gets education in school or they go to labour in market for livelihood and extreme poverty becomes the foundational factor. Both education and earning through manual labour in schools are contradictory exercises, not acceptable for growth and development of children.

Another objection to Gandhian scheme of education has implications for rights of the girl child. Gandhi recognizes the right of children to compulsory education for seven years, but he gives a different curriculum of learning for boys and girls. In his scheme of education, class 4th and 5th syllabus in science should be modified to include Domestic Science for girls and in grade 6 and 7, girls would be allowed to take an advanced course in domestic science in place of basic craft. This differentiation in curriculum on gender basis reflects social conservatism and a particular gendered understanding of Indian social fabric in Gandhian thought which is anachronistic in modern context. The post independence India has founded its educational structure on the principle of

democracy, equality and justice which gives right to children to study without any discrimination on the basis of gender or social group. Accordingly school curriculum does not discriminate on gender basis.

CONCLUSION

Gandhian scheme of education was in response to the prevailing socio-economic conditions in pre independent India and, is based on his understanding of childhood where child growth is dependent on harmonious development of body, mind and soul for which manual work becomes innate part of learning in schools. Such thoughts have a different idea of child rights and hence, tend to justify children working to earn while learning in schools and also self supporting their elementary education. Due to somewhat inconsistency with the ideals of the foundational principles of modern Indian State, Gandhian scheme of education seems to lose its relevance to a certain extent. Children working to pay for their elementary education is seen as denial of their child rights and an expression of children's exploitation. In the changed scenario of post independence India in globalizing world, there is a need to relook and reinvent Gandhian scheme of elementary education.

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