

A magical talisman for the future

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"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away."

The above excerpt unequivocally provides a coherent benchmark for any society to assess itself, for individuals to conduct their lives, for governments to measure their impact and success, and for generations to question to what extent they have progressed from the one before, if at all they have. The question that this article tries to answer is the relevance of the man who has been immortalised through the act of having been made the father of a nation, which is built on a civilization that goes back thousands of years, but one that is not without its share of troubled times, internal conflicts, strife and social and human developmental challenges. In the contemporary world that we live with a multitude of contradictions, and the nation that we all inhabit and in many ways the nation that we are proud of, what could be the relevance of the man who we have learned to call the father of the nation?

By no means, is the answer to this question easy, as it involves introspection and a careful analysis of the current nature of Indian society, which is one of the most complex in the world. Also, since almost every society is built in its classrooms, which are the laboratory of future ideas, it is perhaps more important than ever to explore the relevance of Gandhi and his beliefs on education. One of the most notable contributions of Gandhi to the Indian freedom movement and then to the conception of the Indian state, was to understand the nation as a melting point of multiple histories and identities, where religion, language, and other identities are many and diverse, unlike how a nation state has generally been conceptualized in the west, as that of a homogenous entity. Even though this contribution may not be explicitly prominent, such a thrust to appreciating plurality of cultures and ways of life has been central to the project of Indian nationalism and has shaped India's destiny after independence till today. However, one of his other real contributions, which



haven't received much focus, is his belief in an alternate pedagogy that is possible in a democratic classroom. It may be increasingly desirable with the appropriate political will to incorporate some of his advocacy, to the extent possible into our education system, that far too often places a disproportionate amount of emphasis to a very narrow understanding of education and knowledge.

***Nai talim*: A pedagogic principle that believes in equality and plurality**

Some of the experimentation in school education today in the west and increasingly in India is an attempt to make classrooms more inclusive and to curate them to be more open and democratic learning spaces. Gandhi however had long seen the need for revamping the education system to cater more accurately to the pluralism inherent in most societies, and most specifically to Indian society. Gandhi believed in what was termed, as '*nai talim*, a pedagogic principle, which apart from being conceptualized as a lifelong learning process had several dimensions to it. He developed his belief from his experience with the most notable characteristic and later remnant of British colonialism, that of the English educational system. He found that the prevailing English education system alienates Indian students from their surroundings to the extent of harbouring a disdain for manual work and which facilitates the development of rigid elite classes in society. Since he believed that most cultural and social values are imparted in the classrooms, the nature of instruction in the classrooms should most accurately reflect diversity of thought and democracy of belief systems.

He also conceptualized the role of the educator as one which is

most critical, and he believed it is imperative to ensure that a teacher does not just become a professional limited by structures which are abstract and a curricula which is unimaginative, so as to limit the potential of exchange between the teacher and the learners. Gandhi's pedagogical philosophy allows us to appreciate how the means to maximize the potential of democratic citizenship and the tools to inculcate tolerance and respect for multiplicity of opinions and perspectives as an adult citizen, are to be found in the early years when one is in the classroom. This is done by an educator who knows how best to synergize the varying talents, skills, and backgrounds of different learners in a symbiotic and holistic learning environment, where true knowledge is created through discussions, wholehearted participation, and deliberations. In other words, Gandhi's most valuable contribution in the space of education and learning is the articulation of the deep connection between spirituality, a classroom that follows democratic instruction with equal space and prominence between different learners and the educator, with that of being able to participate in true democracy as adult citizens. In furtherance of his belief in lifelong learning, and in line with his belief in the role of the classroom in shaping human potential and personalities, he believed that a holistic, pluralistic, and open classroom can produce better citizens and prevent developments of elite classes and exclusionary and discriminatory ideas of privilege and power. This perhaps has tremendous relevance in Indian society, which is in transition and where there is constant friction between ideals of modernity and tradition and between different social, cultural, and ethnic groups.

The role of the educator in an ideal classroom

Gandhi has been quoted to have remarked, "*A teacher who establishes rapport with the taught, becomes one with them, learns more from them than he teaches them. He who learns nothing from his disciples is, in my opinion, worthless. Whenever I talk with someone I learn from him. I take from him more than I give him. In this way, a true teacher regards himself as a student of his students. If you will teach your pupils with this attitude, you will benefit much from them.*" Even though the excerpt above talks about the teacher benefiting from a democratic exchange of ideas, the benefit isn't just one way, most importantly it is only when a teacher completely immerses oneself in the act of integrating theory and practice by illuminating practice with theoretical construction and by facilitating learning from doing, the true essence of this pedagogic principle is realized. Through this excerpt, Gandhi's views on education most accurately fits constructivist notions of knowledge creation, where knowledge is believed to be created equally by all participants and in this context equally by the educator and the learner. Since the philosophical strands of constructivism does not believe in one objective knowledge but a shared and often a deliberated and discussed understanding of phenomena, Gandhi believed that educators should equally facilitate and participate in the creation of knowledge without prejudice to the unequal power relations between a teacher and a student that very often hinders free flow of ideas and the possible cognitive gains that can emerge from the classroom.

Education that promotes dignity of work and labour

In furtherance of his belief in



advocacy can be absorbed in conventional schools. Since the benefits of doing while learning has long been established in cognitive sciences, it is imperative that policy makers and curriculum developers innovate a method to best allow such holistic educational practices to be encouraged and to draft the curriculum in such a manner that teachers are not only empowered to use such pedagogic practices but that they have enough freedom to make activity based learning a critical component of classroom instruction. It is only through such innovation can the talisman nudge society to more equality, freedom, and progress.

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lifelong learning, and in line with his belief in the role of the classroom in shaping human potential and personalities, he believed that a holistic, pluralistic, and open classroom can produce better citizens and prevent developments of elite classes, in addition to exclusionary and discriminatory ideas of privilege and power. This is especially relevant in a society that for centuries has had social prejudices that limit human potential, through institutionalized socio-cultural systems. This is perhaps also one of the most disturbing aspects of Indian society, where the power, prestige, and credibility accorded to different kinds of work and labour depends largely on the nature of the work and the extent to which the work is manual. According to Gandhi, such disdain is born out of the artificial distinction between abstract theoretical learning and manual

work with the hand, both of which are seen to be at different extremes of respect and value. He believed that an education that incorporates both the elements of theoretical learning and work from an early age of the learner, will not only cognitively be beneficial for the learner, but it will also strike at the den of societal prejudices that is imbibed through a narrow and restrictive curricula that adversely affects young and impressionable minds.

Some schools of late, even those that are not modelled completely on Gandhi's principles of alternate education, can increasingly be seen to be trying to impart a range of vocational and practical skills, in addition to regular instruction in theoretical domains. However, there remains a huge scope and relevance for incorporating many of Gandhi's ideas of a holistic education, even if not all of his