

Learning through living

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The historical Gandhi, like all mortals, was a human being. In that he was limited. It is the mortal Gandhi who is either loved with a special reverence or hated with a special passion.

It is the civilizational Gandhi who is free from the bondage of time and space and lingers in the mind of the people. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi realized when he came back to India from South Africa in 1915, that if people were to live rationally, develop their personalities and reap the fullness of life, the social order to be adopted had to have simplicity as the keystone.

For a people to be developed in body, mind, and spirit, everyone must aim at achieving as large a measure of self sufficiency as possible. This, Gandhiji felt, would reduce to a minimum, the stress and strain of market demands. Science, Gandhiji felt, should be used to devise tools and machines suitable for use by small industrial units or guilds in small communities so that personal responsibility, creative opportunity and cooperation may be the right of all and be exercised to the highest degree.

The foundation for such a society must be laid in a system of education, which teaches the art of discerning and estimating relative values and



how to realize them, including that of mediation and worship – in other words, the art of living; Gandhiji outlined such a system of education which he called basic education. It may be described as the art of performing all the functions necessary to human life with the mind and soul, thus giving to daily tasks a significance, a meaning and a spiritual value. Gandhiji believed that every person ought to spend some time at least, working with his hands, producing something that is necessary to his physical existence. Only then, he can understand the significance of brotherhood and cooperation of art and of worship.

Gandhiji thus emerges as the most profound social revolutionary of our time. The demands which he made upon his followers and upon society at large and which he fulfilled in so large a measure in his own life, he believed to be the only means whereby the violence that is inherent in our civilization, in the east and the west can be removed.

For Gandhi, the well-planned satyagraha and constructive programme, especially the latter, held the key to India's moral regeneration and political independence. For nearly 30 years, he single mindedly devoted all his energies to both. He needed a united team of men and women. He needed a team with complementary talents and he skillfully identified, nurtured, and welded them. Sometimes he took over whole families, used their members to reinforce each other's commitment to his cause. And even became their honorary senior member, resolving internal tensions and exercising an immense emotional influence, especially over the women and the young.

Gandhiji held that the constructive programme could not only

generate a vast reservoir of non-violent energy, but could also serve as the basis of moral authority and even political power. He thought that much of the energy expended on behalf of external political ends was in fact wasted and would be far better used by earnest satyagrahis in the immense project of social reform and public service. Whilst civil disobedience and other forms of resistance could advance social amelioration, they could not establish the firm foundation for a general and continuous improvement of society or for the full realization of economic, social, and moral freedom.

While acknowledging the possibility of a division of labour for the sake of efficiency, Gandhi rejected any sharp separation between the so called political programmes and the constructive programme. It is, he thought, the judicious combination of constructive work and effective resistance that makes satyagraha radically subversive of all forms of elitist politics. He urged volunteers in the constructive programme to occupy themselves with work that brings neither fame nor power. All political work must fall within the constructive work and its merit should be judged only in terms of lasting social transformation. For the ashram, Gandhiji favoured the development of a true science of economics based on the principles of sarvodaya and directed towards an intelligent regulation of the flow of wealth.

Writing on sarvodaya in *Indian Opinion*, Gandhiji defined the flow of wealth in terms of justice and proposed as criterion for justice in economic exchange, the principle that a just wage for a worker will be that which will secure him the same labour when he needs it as he has put in for us today. "My ideal is", said Gandhi, "equal distribution

but so far as I can see, it is not to be realized; I therefore, work for equitable distribution."

Basic education constituted a vital part of Gandhi's constructive programme. In the ashrams, Gandhi modelled his own theories of education. For Gandhi, education was a life-long process, a process of character building. Basic education is a process of learning through doing. It recognizes the organic connection between the fingers, the senses, and the mind and the greater vitality and retention of knowledge that is gained by doing and making things than by merely reading books or listening to lectures.

Basic education is a way of life, a method of learning and living, of learning through living, an art, which ought to begin on the day of birth and continue until death. It is a system of education, which from infancy trains human beings to live humanely as members of small, vital communities and through personal and cooperative action satisfy their common needs to organize their own economic life and on its foundation build a beautiful and vital spiritual life. In such communities, every person may and to some extent will, become an architect of life and thus will live vitally, enthusiastically, and satisfyingly. The mastering of a craft is the primary medium of learning in Gandhiji's scheme of education. A Gandhian education programme is all about the integration of hand, head, and heart. Handicraft was the centre of the educational method, but the student must learn to correlate it with the physical and the social environment. In *All men are brothers*, Gandhi elaborates, "By education I mean an all round drawing out the best in child and man – body, mind, and spirit." Gandhi said, "Literacy is not the

end of education, not even the beginning. I would therefore begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft."

Gandhi thought that through the practice of a craft, students could learn to be self-sufficient and become integrated with society in a spirit of cooperation. Students must be prepared to take the spade, the broomstick, and the basket in order to repay their debt to society. NR Malkani, a friend of Gandhi and a frequent visitor to Gandhi's satyagraha ashram in Ahmedabad writes in *Gandhi's Ashram – A Unique Opportunity in Gandhi Marg*, that it was, "more busy than a beehive, essentially a place for manual work, as a duty to life." Duties included dairying, spinning, weaving, and tanning. It was not

a religious community. Malkani adds, "Everybody observed the equality of religions both in belief and practice."

Gandhi was fundamentally opposed to the divorce of ethics and commerce, as happened in the development of the economy of the Industrial Revolution. The labour which men contribute to society demands the lion's share of their best hours. Accordingly, it ought to make a substantial contribution to the culture, development, satisfaction and well-being of those who contribute to it. However, it fails to do this in a large and growing number of cases under the conditions of modern industrialism, for reasons already given. When work is performed for money only, it ceases to be a vocation and loses

its cultural or spiritual value. One of the functions of basic education is to give human labour a spiritual and cultural content.

Most of what Gandhi had warned against became a reality soon after his death. Gandhi contrasted the economy of permanence with the economy of transience. The latter is dramatically manifest in the large scale use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides which give massive crop yields in the short run and eventually destroy the soil. Millions of Indians are caught in tension packed lives in crowded, filthy cities. Most Indian villages have receded still further from the dream of creative self-sufficiency.

At Sevagram, Gandhi was primarily concerned with evolving a pattern of life that could face the challenges of the urban industrial civilization, with its concomitant evils of market economy fed on consumerism.

We no longer need the information based education which teaches us the skill of memorizing. Any information needed can easily be obtained with information technology at every child's reach. We need hands-on education.

So where do we go from here? A combination of Montessori and ABL?

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