

Current experiments in *nai talim*

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The idea of *nai talim* or Basic Education was given by Mahatma Gandhi decades before we attained independence from the British. It was based on the thought that education should be centered around a productive work or vocation such as weaving cloth, farming or agriculture, shoe-making, etc. This work was required to be chosen keeping the child and his local environment in mind. It was grounded on the 3Hs – Head, Heart, and Hand and claimed that work and intelligence were inseparable. Education under this was to be given through the child's mother tongue and the foundation of this education was on sound moral principles. The role of the

teacher was more of a facilitator and s/he was also expected to learn from the students as the model was child-centric and not teacher-centric.

But all these ideas of *nai talim* have been considered "outdated" time and again and following it seemed difficult for schools in the current scenario. Yet there are schools such as Anand Niketan and Gandhi Ashram, Wardha which continue to follow *nai talim*.

These 'alternative' institutions have brought in non-traditional thoughts, opposing mainstream conventional education; and focus on non-standardized and unconventional curriculum, pedagogy, assessments and on vocational education. It is more child-centric, based on training for life-skills, enhancing creativity, and developing a sense of entrepreneurship. These schools are based on the idea of "unschooling".

Puvudham Learning Centre

Located in Nagarkoodal area of Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu, Puvudham Rural Development Trust started in 2000, aims at developing effective organic farming techniques and providing a humane and child-centered environment for its students. Its vision is to spread organic farming, self-sufficiency in terms of water, energy, food, and learning and ensuring that rural children value their environment. The students are primarily children of dalit and other farming communities and the staff includes locally educated youth. The school started with seven children and the number increased to 83 by 2007.



With farming being its focus, there is a set curriculum which links farming with various subjects, for example:

Subject	Topic related to farming/agriculture
Mathematics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calculate number of seeds required • Extrapolate for larger areas
Geometry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw the patterns of planting • Understand how plant density can be increased keeping same plant to plant distances using new patterns
Biology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study the relation between plant growth, soil fertility, seasons, humus, etc. • Need for biodiversity, crop rotation, trees in farming, etc.
Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study the inputs and outputs • How to fix the price of a product
History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study the history of farming • Find the reason for the extinction of certain seeds and farming practices
Geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How farming is connected with topography, climate, elevation, location of industries.

Children of grade levels 3 to 7 grow vegetables, plant trees alongside the road, manage a tree nursery, set up a vermin-compost pit and prepare herbal repellants.

There are other activities as well on which students are trained including embroidery, knitting, soap-making, basket weaving, cloth weaving, pottery, waste-disposal, etc. Students also participate in sports such as karate, and activities such as dance, drama and singing; and are exposed to the world beyond their village through trips to places such as Pondicherry and Auroville. They are taught to read and write both Tamil (their mother tongue) and English. Children are taught through role plays, workshops, walks, open discussions, experiential learning

with the focus being more on self-learning. There is a library accessible to children as well as computers. Moreover, the centre ensures that it reaches out to the community, involving them in various ways including getting members to teach various occupations to the students, the students helping them in organic farming and improving the life in the village through awareness campaigns on issues such as migration, deforestation, health, using local herbs, etc.

Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya

Kalkeri Sangeet Vidyalaya was founded in 2002 in Dharwad, Karnataka. This school provides free education (no fees at all!), food, accommodation, and healthcare to the students. Students

are trained in the performing arts that include Hindustani classical music, Kathak dance, which has a stronger link than Bharat Natyam to Hindustani classical music, and drama. This is combined with regular schooling based on the Karnataka state syllabus and teaching of computers. Students, aged 6-23 years, come from both rural and urban communities as their access to holistic education is limited. Regardless of cultural, social or religious diversities, Kalkeri gives them the opportunity to obtain qualifications in academics and music. The school believes that a knowledge in music will enable their students to find meaningful and well-paid employment, breaking the cycle of persistent poverty and creating a better future for themselves and their communities.

The school is based on the gurukul tradition of providing education. Hence, all the students stay in the school hostel and have turned it into their homes with the teachers being their parents. When Mathieu Fortier, a Canadian citizen set up Kalkeri, the idea was to serve children from disadvantaged communities and to conserve the musical heritage of India. It has 250 students who have travelled to various places across India conducting concerts at both regional and national levels, promoting the school and attracting donors. This money helps in running the school.





Children here are taught in their mother tongue Kannada along with Hindi and English in higher grades; and math, science and social science. Grade 1-5 students learn the basics of harmonium, tabla, vocal music, dance, and drama along with learning an instrument such as sitar, tabla, violin, bansuri, etc. The students practice music from 8.30 am to 11.30 am daily and attend academic classes in the afternoon. Students prepare for music examinations under the Karnataka State Board and Gandharva Mahavidyalaya.

The school has a strong student council which is vocal when it comes to functioning as a community. The students also carry out activities such as cooking, gardening, etc. This learning is based on justice, non-violence, equality, sharing, cooperation, and respect for the environment.

Power to the school is provided through a 14KW solar AC Mini Grid. There are solar water heaters as well as a bio gas plant. The school has been the recipient of the Zayed Future Energy Prize.

SECMOL

The Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh, founded in 1988 by Sonam Wangchuk is based on the idea of 3Hs – Bright Head, Skilled Hands, and Kind Heart. The school building, including three residential houses, runs completely on solar energy. There are 40 students who live in the school and run the campus themselves

on a democratic basis. It is the students who prepare the meal and maintain the vegetable garden. They manage everything from the solar electricity equipment, to milking the cows, to cleaning the campus. They are even involved in the construction work done for the campus. Every year students also manage the process of preparing jams and juices made from apricots. The school runs camps for other Ladakhis also annually on vocational guidance, environment awareness and entrepreneurship along with English, Ladakhi history and geography, solar energy, health, nature, Ladakhi language and literacy, painting and educational games; students prepare songs and dances, Ladakhi and English videos, conduct debates and quiz contests and are taught volleyball, cricket, football, etc., by volunteers.

Volunteers visiting SECMOL teach ice skating, dance, drama, art, music, etc. The academic subjects include English, math, urdu, hindi, and science. Importance is given to Ladakh-specific knowledge with emphasis on learning Ladakhi history, language, songs, and music. Children listen to Ladakhi news every evening on the radio and read Ladakhi publications. *Aksharnandan, Pune.*

Aksharnandan was started in 1992 with the idea of having a curriculum that was linked to the actual lives of the students and not based in competition or exam-oriented rote learning. The school runs from kindergarten to grade 10, following both SSC and NIOS curriculum, depending on the child's comfort with subjects. Each class has about 40 students with 25 per cent from low-income backgrounds. Therefore, the children of the school's guard and that of a CEO of a big corporation study together in the same

classroom. Children with special needs are also part of mainstream classrooms. All students are taught in their mother tongue Marathi, with English and hindi as second and third languages. The school believes in the 3H ideology and hence academics are interlinked with activities such as farming, cooking, and craft-work including carpentry. When learning about certain things such as vegetables, students are actually taken to the market to talk to vendors selling vegetables. The students manage the small field, sowing wheat, etc. and also have a vermi-compost pit for generating manure. In January, students prepare craft material for the bazaar including wooden tables, lamps, hangings for decoration, etc., which help in generating income for the school's activities.

Conclusion

All the above mentioned schools follow the basics of *nai talim* in some form or the other, but there is no "pure" form of *nai talim* as Gandhi proposed. Even Gandhian institutions in the country are not following *nai talim* in the letter and spirit. Far from being self-sufficient, education has either become state supported, with debatable quality, or commercialized and exclusive, out of the reach of common citizens. Still, there are many small experiments in *nai talim* such as those mentioned, happening in various parts of India including Bengal, Ahmedabad, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, etc., contextualizing *nai talim* to fit in for schools of today.

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