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As the world approaches the close of this century, many ideas practised and preached by Mahatma Gandhi are becoming increasingly relevant as guides to state policy. The most interesting, and understandably controversial, of his favourite ideas is that of local self-reliance.

In a world said to have become interdependent, local self-reliance seems irrelevant, indeed heretical. Yet the fact remains that the world is not really interdependent. Many countries of the South are caught in a debt-trap which forces them to part with a substantial portion of their national income to pay the interest they owe the North. This ghastly compulsion impoverishes these countries further, rendering their labour force and natural resources steadily more vulnerable. In the so-called global village, the real village is dependent on the city for such essential needs of life as work and health care. Gandhi's insistence on local self-reliance was precisely in such basic aspects of life. The world is armed today with sophisticated technological solutions to every human problem, yet the majority of people suffer from malnutrition, unemployment and chronic illness. This obvious contradiction suggests that Gandhi's plea for local self-reliance in the matter of basic needs deserves to be heard again.

A second salient feature of Gandhi's legacy is the importance of imaginative action. If there is such a thing as a Gandhian theory, surely it is a theory of action which emphasizes role-playing with earnestness and imagination. All Gandhi's major political and social battles, starting with his work in South Africa, illustrate this point. In retrospect, these battles look crafted to perfection as localized socio-dramas with a universal appeal. The salt satyagraha is probably the best known example of such a battle, but numerous smaller episodes occurred throughout Gandhi's life. For example, when the engine installed for running the press at Phoenix Farm in South Africa failed, Gandhi successfully mobilized his colleagues to run the press manually all night so that Indian Opinion would come out on time. This early event suggests two other aspects of Gandhi's theory of action, apart from commitment to one's role. One is his insistence on autonomy which translates into freedom from dependence on any single option. The other is persistence. If one looks at Gandhi's life from a pedagogical perspective, one can aptly describe it as a long lesson in the value of the freedom of initiative and tenacity to the cause at hand.

Finally, Gandhi's legacy must remind us of the significance of the spatial community and the family. Child welfare - indeed, all human welfare - has its locus in these two units of collective life in Gandhi's picture of the world. Democracy, both as a system of governance and as a way of living, depends on the expression it finds in these two units. As Marjorie Sykes, probably the best commentator on Gandhi's educational thought reminded a symposium a few years back, Gandhi's idea of democratic living depends on the possibility of a face-to-face dialogue among the members of a community. This ideal is, of course, ancient, having been established by the Greek philosophers, but its meaning and potential are yet to be realised in our age even though our world seems to have espoused democracy as the only worthwhile form of government.

In his last book, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), John Dewey - whose educational theory meets Gandhi's proposal on many crucial counts, talked about the difficulties that the 20th century was facing in letting the spatial community stay alive and relevant to human life. During the last decade or so, many nation-states have woken up to the damage modern planning of societies has done to local communities and the family, leaving the child to be cared for by the faceless state. As we plan redress, we can find an important resource of ideas and inspiration in Gandhi's legacy.

The model of children's education that flows from Gandhi's vision of a desirable society strikingly matches the most important implications that one might draw from modern child psychology for organizing or reforming the system of education. These implications can be listed in the following manner:

- * The child's immediate milieu must serve as a resource for the re-discovery of accepted knowledge;
- * Children must have the freedom to create their own models of knowledge about the world;

- * Learning must provide for opportunities for children to be physically active;
- * Classroom activities must resonate and extend the child's life at home and in its surroundings.

Gandhi's choice of the local as the appropriate context for the exercise of initiative and persistence suggests an obvious parallel to the concepts of exploration and reconstruction we find in Piaget's psycho-philosophy of knowledge. Parallels can also be drawn between the links that Dewey perceived between children's learning of subject matter and their milieu on one hand, and Gandhi's view of the school as an institutionalized forum of the community, on the other.

These parallels were reflected in the proposal Gandhi made in the specific context of education, but the proposal had another item which was related to his economics and his own early experience of teaching children at Phoenix and Tolstoy Farms in South Africa. This concerned the introduction of handicrafts as an organizing principle of the school curriculum. Much has been written on this aspect of Gandhi's *nai talim* or 'new education' which is also known as 'basic education'. In summary, the idea of traditional handicrafts providing an axis for the school's daily curriculum had in it the following elements which formed its rationale:

- * Bridging the school with the world of work;
- * Imparting an activity orientation to the curriculum; and
- * Inculcating a sense of self-reliance.

Historical documents concerning the attempt made between the late 30s and the late 50s to give a 'basic' orientation to India's education system refer to several questions and problems that arose in the wake of Gandhi's idea of using handicrafts as the organizing principle of the curriculum. Some of the questions might seem to have merely a historical value today, but they are nevertheless worth recording. The most controversial question was whether the introduction of handicrafts can make the school an economically productive institution.

Gandhi had, in fact, suggested that productive activity centred in traditional handicrafts could enable the school to sustain itself financially. A lot of hostility that basic education programmes had to face undoubtedly arose from this idea, its opponents arguing that productive schools would become factories of child labour. Historically, it would appear that Gandhi's emphasis on making schools self-sustaining was related to his understandable repugnance towards the use of revenue earned from the sale of liquor for children's education.

As time went by and experience showed both the practical difficulties and limitations of using children's manual work to generate financial resources, the idea took the form of contribution towards school upkeep. Apparently, even this was not acceptable to many, as we can deduce from an official publication written by G Ramachandran, an eminent exponent of Basic Education. In a monograph published by the Government of India in 1957, he wrote that 'the main object of productive work is education through such work and income is only a corollary.' He also took pains to clarify that the productive work given to children 'should be such that children can do it without any undue physical strain... Sweated child labour is the very negation of Basic education and will defeat it completely.'

This controversy over productive manual work need not divert our attention today from an aspect of Gandhi's educational proposal which can be said to constitute its core. This was the idea of work as participative action. Gandhi believed in work as a means whereby human beings can realize not only their material requirements, but also their intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs. It is under conditions of social injustice and oppression that work becomes drudgery and a crude weapon directed against all that makes people human. Basic Education defined work in its broadest sense so as to make it a medium of socializing the child into a participative culture. Individual autonomy and consent to participate in group responsibility were essential to this socializing agenda.

In this emphasis on participative action, Basic Education was consistent with modern pedagogical theory which suggests that children's accomplishment in learning new skills and knowledge depends on their consent to learn, to value the teacher's effort and to work in groups. Two eminent contemporaries of Gandhi, Tagore and Gijubhai, devoted themselves to building institutional models where teaching with the child's consent and participation would be the norm.

Our present system of education fails so often to achieve its aims because the institutional atmosphere, the curriculum, class size, and the methods of teaching ignore the role of the child in education. An erroneous belief commonly reflected in statements of intent is that teachers must

make the child active. Such statements reveal our neglect, or rather ignorance, of the child's nature which is to be active. All that schools need to do is to ensure that the child's natural desire to be active is not curbed; rather, that this desire is given the opportunity and the means of enhancement through convivial action.

The idea that schools should provide children with the opportunity and the means to undertake skilled manual work was obviously to establish in the minds of children the dignity of work, and not just the intellectual work traditionally provided by schools. But manual work, especially in the context of routine tasks related to school upkeep was also designed to inculcate initiative in place of indifference and reluctance to taking personal responsibility. Gandhi's life, and not just his educational proposal, shows that his ultimate mission was to awaken in a colonized people the courage to have faith in choice and initiative. Once he had succeeded in arousing this faith in the context of colonial rule, Gandhi extended the scope of choice to include in it a change in the culturally defined antipathy towards manual work, especially when it meant cleaning.

Gandhi's message is a refusal to cope with the given situation. It forms the first step towards taking personal responsibility for one's work. Translated in terms of pedagogical theory, it would mean habituating children to feel responsible out of a personal urge rather than out of the need to comply with someone's orders. Institutional ethos is the primary means of creating such a habit, but the curriculum must highlight this goal as a formal objective ranking higher than literacy or numeracy.

Giving Gandhi's 'new education' a second hearing today would require that we look at autonomy and initiative from the teacher's perspective as well. It can hardly be imagined that teachers who are themselves not used to exercising autonomy can encourage children to be autonomous. The ability to take independent decisions and the desire to take personal responsibility must figure as major objectives of teacher training. This, however, cannot be sufficient to ensure that training in such objectives will be actually put into practice. The physical conditions under which elementary teachers work, the rule-structures that govern their career and the culture of the offices to which teachers are obliged to go in order to fulfil administrative routines - all of these constitute an important part of the legacy of colonial rule against which Gandhi had struggled.

The official routines and rules that govern lives and careers of teachers to this day almost prohibit independent thinking and ingenuity. Even in purely academic matters like shaping the curriculum and selecting pedagogical material, obsolete procedures and expectations continue to hold sway even as new ideas are mouthed as being preferable. Young teachers often get a shock when they discover that an initiative taken by them was not welcomed. During the '50s when Basic Education was widely practised, inspectorial norms and procedures were found to be faulty and problematic for pedagogical change. Teachers who attempted to switch from textbook-based instruction to organizing activities were often criticized for being over-enthusiastic. Even today, inspectorial expectations are tied to the old, syllabus-covering approach. More than teachers, it is often the monitoring officials who fail to realize that the two kinds of approaches are entirely different and cannot be evaluated on similar criteria.

While we prepare ourselves to rediscover Gandhi's legacy and define it for our times, we can greatly benefit ourselves by drawing a few lessons from the past experience of Basic Education. The abandoning of Basic Education in the early '60s in many parts of the country for its alleged failure need not be treated as a permanent stigma. The destiny of educational ideas, as indeed of all ideas, is shaped by historical circumstances. It would be foolish to disqualify an idea for a fresh trial just because the shape it took at a certain point in history proved unsatisfactory. In any case, the judgement that Basic Education failed in the first round is problematic. Many Basic Education institutions carried out excellent programmes in the hey-day of Gandhi's idea, and some continue their battle against all possible odds to this day. In Gujarat, Basic Education is still a part of the official policy, and at Siksha Niketan in Burdwan district of West Bengal, a Basic school was started as recently as 1987 in the memory of Acharya Pramathanath Mukhopadhyay. In the context of teacher training, the programmes offered at Gandhi Vidyapith at Vedchchi and Lok Bharati at Sanosara mark a considerable departure from the usual training available elsewhere in the country.

It is apparently as a 'national' system that Basic Education failed to live up to the expectations created by it in the '40s and the '50s. Such a feeling should inspire us to examine the nature of the expectations and the nature of the efforts that were made to fulfil them. The prime expectation

was that Basic Education would bring about social transformation. For this kind of vast, rather amorphous hope to be fulfilled, one key condition would be a supportive socio-economic and political climate. A sustained trial for a long period is another major condition we can imagine. All evidence points to the fact that Basic Education had to face a hostile socio-economic climate, and that the quality of political support it received varied from region to region. Indeed, the main reason why Basic Education could not be sustained for more than a decade or so after Independence was the ambivalence of political patronage.

Political patronage apart, even popular appreciation of Basic Education was far from adequate. A rather limited attempt was made to create popular interest in the idea, especially to counter common misunderstandings about it which many parents evidently entertained. Perhaps it was assumed that the idea was simple, so it would be easily understood and appreciated. It also appears that concerted opposition to it was never expected. Some of those who supported Basic Education as a policy tried to defend it when it was attacked, others responded merely by staying quietly committed to their daily work. It is hard to find a case where the critics of Basic Education were asked to name some other alternative to the traditional system of children's education.

For a revival of Gandhi's concept of education as a guide to general reform today, the lesson is obvious: attention must be given to the creation of a receptive socio-political climate. A second lesson we might learn from the past concerns flexibility and diversity of approaches. Looking back at the '50s, one finds that an orthodox interpretation of Gandhi's proposal was common. It was reflected in the uniformity of curricular choices, training procedures, and administrative arrangements. This was obviously a major contradiction, considering that Gandhi was among the strongest critics of the uniformity that colonial rule had imposed on schools in India. In this matter, Basic Education became a victim of the bureaucratic culture entrenched in the education system.

In a revived Basic Education programme, local and regional diversity of approaches must be encouraged as a matter of principle, not just tolerated. But diversity cannot be triggered by pressing a button, especially when it has been discouraged for so long and when the bias against it is so deep-rooted in policy and planning. Indeed, the capacity to evolve a local style has atrophied among teachers due to long disuse. And the capacity we are talking about is not an outcome of training alone; it also depends on mental attributes such as the desire to experiment, and culturally transmitted attributes such as self-reliance and acceptance of risk. A diversity of approaches will have to be encouraged in a sustained manner for it to become a part of the system. One step towards such encouragement would be to create a climate featuring appreciation of diversity.

The works of three eminent Indian philosophers can provide us with great help in creating a positive social ethos for a policy which might guarantee teachers' freedom to organize the daily curriculum differently around common themes. These philosophers are Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and J. Krishnamurti. Their writings on education, not easily accessible today, need to be widely disseminated as part of the initiative to promote a variety of approaches in a revived Basic Education programme.

Lack of diversity was reflected most sharply in the choice of agriculture and gardening as 'crafts' to be taught at school. This choice was apparently based on the requirement we have discussed earlier, namely that Basic schools should strive towards financial self-sufficiency. The fact that agricultural or gardening activity would generate usable produce and possibly cash perhaps clouded the recognition that this kind of manual activity could hardly be called a handicraft.

The training for precision and accuracy required by traditional handicrafts cannot be easily associated with the manual work involved in agriculture and gardening. In fact, the excessive emphasis given to agricultural production at some basic education institutions led to complaints of children being used as labourers, lending further weight to the already prevalent prejudice against Basic schools. The joy of learning a handicraft and the refinement of senses that it can be expected to bring about in childhood cannot be conveniently associated with production-oriented agricultural work.

A crippling blow was suffered by the post-Independence programme of Basic Education when the schools practising it were denied recognition for higher studies and examinations in certain parts of the country. This structural discord significantly curtailed the options available to children studying in Basic schools. The denial of recognition to their work was based on the argument that they had

not studied the syllabus and textbooks prescribed in the other schools. The attempt made in Basic schools to displace the prescribed textbook from its dominant position in Indian school life proved the single most problematic aspect of Basic Education as far as its image in state offices of education was concerned. Teachers of Basic schools were trained to develop their own daily curriculum of activities and their own material. They were supposed to avoid using the textbook in the early grades, and keep it to the minimum in later grades. In this practice they were following Gandhi's articulate distaste for textbook-centred instruction, which was clearly a part of his general rejection of colonial education. Gandhi had written, "If textbooks are treated as a vehicle for education, the living world of the teacher has very little value. A teacher who teaches from textbooks does not impart originality to his pupils. He himself becomes a slave of textbooks and has no opportunity or occasion to be original. It therefore seems that the less textbooks there are the better it is for the teacher and his pupils." But teaching without textbooks made the inspectorial bureaucracy feel uncomfortable, and that was one reason why Basic schools had so much trouble gaining accreditation at par with other schools.

Even today, when voluntary agencies engaged in innovative work attempt to replace the prescribed textbook with other material, they have to face the difficult task of convincing the bureaucracy that the work they are doing is as serious as the work normal schools are doing with textbooks. Apparently, the colonial practice of prescribing textbooks continues to fulfil some deep psychological function in the system of education and in the society it serves. Even parents get apprehensive about the quality of instruction when it is not squarely based on the prescribed text. Understandably, parents belonging to economically weaker strata of society get particularly suspicious about such instruction because school textbooks are the only books in their houses. The textbook symbolizes authentic and approved knowledge, the ultimate proof of its indispensability being that the examination is based on it. The prescribed textbook, thus, forms the hub of a structure of relationships governing the system of education.

The past experience of Basic Education provides us with an excellent guide to train and motivate the teacher to plan his or her own daily curriculum and assemble appropriate material to execute the plan. The same past experience warns us that such laudable changes in teaching might create misconceptions among parents and officers if textbooks are denigrated or dispensed with. We need to look at the textbook itself in our search for a solution to this problem. There is no theoretical reason why textbooks should demean the teacher's work, as Gandhi had found they were doing, or the child's natural urge to be active. If textbooks have such tragic consequences, the fault might lie to a great extent with the textbooks themselves and with the syllabus which they supposedly follow.

The report of the Yashpal committee, which was appointed by the Government of India three years ago to examine the widespread problem of curricular burden on children, found Indian textbooks to be greatly deficient in terms of the capacity to arouse children's interest and involvement in learning. As this report suggests, our textbooks seldom require children to observe the world around them or to engage in purposive activity. Some textbooks do list classroom activities in a routine manner. Often, these activities are of the kind that cannot be organized in an ordinary classroom. And what children might learn from these activities is stated anyhow.

On the score of arousing interest, modern textbooks often fare worse than the textbooks written in Gandhi's day. But all such deficiencies can be overcome if textbooks are written with greater care and with the active participation of teachers. The training given to teachers in the old programme of Basic Education to prepare classroom material can be incorporated in future into an enhanced, more general preparation for participation in textbook writing.

A fresh initiative using Gandhi's educational thought must break new ground in conceptualizing relevant knowledge for today's children. It should also mark an improvement on past experience of Basic Education in areas where it revealed structural and practical problems. The psychological insights into childhood that are available to us now should also be reflected in the new programme. The following core areas might form an attractive curricular design for a revived Basic Education programme:

Core area I	Core area II	Core area III	Core area IV
Health and hygiene Nature study Social study	Heritage craft (e.g. weaving, Toycrafts, clay work or any other handicraft	Expressive arts Reading Writing	Mathematics Sorting and representation of

The four core areas named above can be expected to provide for opportunities to extend children's experiential base and knowledge as they advance from grade one to five. These core areas can also supply a basis for further classification of knowledge in the remaining grades of elementary education, namely grades six to eight.

Two aspects of this curricular design that deserve some elaboration are nature study and heritage crafts. In the present elementary-level science curriculum, nature study has the latent purpose of imparting a sense of conquest or control over nature. Such an idea is quite contrary to Gandhi's vision of a world where human beings and nature might co-exist. It also clashes with the widely accepted current knowledge of ecological balance and sustainability, for example in the context of disease-control with the help of poisons. The contradictions involved in such strategies are noticed by children long before they are acknowledged, that too reluctantly, in the school. The confusion and cynicism that this delayed acknowledgement causes can be avoided if school pedagogy provides for nature study in the context of a holistic vision of life and health.

The inclusion of heritage crafts in the elementary school curriculum can be expected to make a unique contribution which would combine several different educational aims. These would include the imparting of manual skill and dexterity, aesthetic sense, and the development of certain aspects of personality which the traditional school curriculum and culture routinely fails to develop. These aspects relate to self-esteem arising from a sense of worth and confidence in one's competence. Teaching of heritage crafts in childhood can stem the large-scale de-skilling of young people that is taking place as a result of poorly conceived modernisation. In association with the expressive arts (such as music, drawing and painting), handicrafts can provide that much-needed training of the senses on which alone the development of meaningful literacy skills can take place.

Specific activities and topics of study that would fill up these core areas ought to be identified at regional and local levels. For this exercise, the following ideas can perhaps be treated as guiding principles derived from Gandhi's legacy and child psychology:

- * The child's immediate milieu is treated as a resource for itemizing required knowledge and skills (for example, local birds, flowers, crops and trees; local language and folklore; and locally practiced crafts and expressive arts).
- * All topics are taught with the help of activities. These activities may be the ones suggested in a curriculum guideline or they may be new ones, devised by the teacher.
- * Children are trained to work in small groups.
- * Classroom activities aim at extending the child's life at home.
- * Some activities provide for opportunities requiring children to work outside the classroom every day.
- * A few topics are selected for deeper probing which might take several days, taking the shape of a project.
- * Children are given opportunities to work independently of the teacher.

The acceptance of these guiding principles will demand a major initiative towards changing present-day teacher training. In planning such an initiative, we can realistically hope to find useful ideas in the literature documenting the Basic Education programmes of the '50s and in the ongoing training programmes of certain Gandhian institutions.

One organizational change which might greatly assist in realizing a key goal of Basic Education would be to amalgamate community-level health services with the local elementary school. It is a common experience that village-level health workers have closer ties with the community than the school teacher. The situation does, of course, vary according to region, but in general the health worker seems to have more personal acquaintance with parents and children than the teacher has. The health worker is also usually better equipped than the teacher to look after children's health-related problems and to advise them on such problems. Incorporating the health worker's services to the school will enhance the school's capacity to work for children's welfare. The isolated and meagre instruction which the school provides at present seldom succeeds in making health and hygiene prime concerns of practical knowledge for the growing child.

A similar step needs to be taken in the context of the services currently provided under Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programmes for early childhood care and pre-school education.

It is ironical that the services made available under this programme in thousands of villages remain isolated from school even though the services are aimed at making children's transition to school smoother. Separating these services from the school has exacerbated the confusion in the community's mind over the nature and function of different institutions. Such confusion hardly helps in motivating the community to participate in the running of these institutions. A truly integrated set of child-related programmes will surely have a better chance of success in inspiring people to take active interest in these programmes and to feel responsible towards them. Such integration will be compatible with the holistic vision of community welfare embedded in the idea of Basic Education.

Finally, a new programme of Basic Education must address the task of creating conditions in which the teacher can establish contact with the community and the family. Planners of Basic Education in the '50s had, for this purpose, chalked out school designs that would include housing for teachers. We need to revisit the homework done at that time, for the problem it attempted to deal with still afflicts the system of elementary education. In fact, it has become more acute. The daily commuting by hundreds of thousands of elementary school teachers every day to their village school and back on public transport represents a tragic waste of their energy and modest personal resources. It also represents a major loss for the children and the community which the teacher is supposed to serve.

By enabling teachers to become a part of the spatial community we can hope to enhance their involvement in children's out-of-school life. The goal of a Gandhian plan of educational reconstruction can only be to make teachers responsible for the overall development of the children they work with. Progress in this direction will depend on the extent to which bureaucratic control over schools and teachers is replaced by a system of accountability, jointly managed by teachers and the community. The degradation suffered by elementary-level teachers at the hands of officials is the single most relevant reason why teachers greet every reform with cynicism and resignation. This attitude cannot be countered without making alterations in entrenched styles of financial and administrative control. Decision-making and power are involved in each micro-detail or routine functioning of the system. These micro-details can be visualised as so many screws of a giant colonial machinery. The best of ideas aimed at winning the teacher's heart and the community's support get crushed under these screws. A new programme of Basic Education can hardly be expected to work if these screws remain intact.