

SIGNIFICANCE OF EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL THOUGHT OF DEWEY AND GANDHI IN 21ST CENTURY INDIA: AN INTERPRETATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Politically Indian democracy has been strong for a while now, but the notion of considering education as a democratic right is fairly a new proposition. It is a scheme which so far cannot be said to have influenced the system of education in India in a substantial manner. In other words, putting elementary education into the list of fundamental civic right is only symbolic. The transformation of its symbolic value into a reconceptualisation of education as a facet of democracy, not merely an instrument of democratization – is a strenuous undertaking. This paper then attempts to commence this task with hope and concern to detail by using Dewey's and Gandhi's ideas on education. It intends to compare Dewey's and Gandhi's educational and social thought. Even though Dewey's democracy finds its motivational energy from within its functioning and Gandhi's democracy is an outcome of the human urge for the divine, both Dewey and Gandhi become significant in the 21st century for reconstructing a better education system in India.

KEYWORDS: *Substantial Manner, Reconceptualisation of Education, Socializes and Restores Order*

INTRODUCTION

Education is a process of inner transformation. At one level education has a deep meaning where it is a lifelong process of learning that takes places everywhere. And therefore it is not common to find people who have not received proper school education yet are extremely wise and full of knowledge. Same ways, degrees/diplomas may not necessarily provide one with what is considered to be cultured/educated being. In other sense, in the modern democratic world, today school education has acquired much greater importance than ever before. It is, however, true that in India millions of children have not yet been able to get school education. The absence of schooling in their lives is a harsh reality to reckon with. But I do not wish to elaborate on this absence rather I wish to explore the meaning of present-day education system and see how both Dewey and Gandhi become relevant in reconstructing a better education system in India.

To begin with, one can argue how sociologists and educationists have studied school education – its reason for its existence, the purpose it serves, the difference it makes in one's life and its relationship with the larger society. It's important to engage with the implications of schooling and understand whether it socializes and restores order, whether it legitimizes and perpetuates inequality, whether empowers, subjugates or controls, whether it has the power to transform and radicalize society. By looking at these discourses one can deal with issues such as schooling and society, ideology and curriculum, pedagogy and politics. As society undergoes changes from time to time, so do the social expectations from education. From John Dewey to Ivan Illich, from Leo Tolstoy to Mahatma Gandhi, from Rabindranath Tagore to Jiddu Krishnamurthy – all have reflected upon the domain of education. A study in the domain of education system in India

requires a deep and meaningful engagement with the social and educational thought of both Dewey and Gandhi.

Why Dewey and Gandhi?

Dewey believed that experiment is an essential condition of worthwhile knowledge. Dewey did not appreciate the duality that exists between theory and practice, and therefore he offered an approach towards knowledge which encourages one to act upon the world, rather than merely watch it closely. As a social philosopher and a pedagogue, Dewey's primary concerns are inherent in this very readiness to act or adapt or accommodate – features that are associated with learning and Democracy by Dewey. Dewey not just sees democracy as a system of governance but sees it as a way of life (Dewey 2004). Similarly, in a classroom democracy is much more than a behavioral value or a means of better learning. A deeper emphasis is laid on the freedom to act as the only means of self-realisation available to the individual.

Keeping the above concerns in mind I wish to look at Dewey's work *Democracy and Education* in contemporary times in the context of the Indian education system. As an Indian reader, I am compelled to compare the educational and social thought of Dewey with that of Gandhi. Hence in this paper, I wish to look at the relevance and significance of Dewey's ideas on education and democracy by putting them in contrast with that of Gandhi's.

As an Indian reader of Dewey, I feel slightly uneasy with his idealized view of democracy, as we in our country are preoccupied with many distortions to which democratic governance and politics have proved vulnerable. Dewey's ideas at times also appear somewhat a historic. Another source of skepticism is found in Dewey's faith in science as the process of both rational and moral inspiration to reconstruct society. Of course, we know of far too many incidents since Hiroshima/Nagasaki to be skeptical about the scope of science in serving a resource for democratic temper. These points layout Dewey's limitations but his views of democracy should be seen as a social sphere charged with the idea of communication. Similarly his thought of social efficiency as that 'socialization of mind which is actively concerned in making experiences more communicable; in breaking down the barriers of social stratification which make individuals impervious to the interests of others' deserves attention (Dewey 2004). Perhaps it's real significance for us lies in the pedagogic fields it demarcates so sharply. Dewey's clarity regarding the difference between conservative and progressive methods of teaching maintains its monumental appeal. In this paper, I have tried to see these ideas in the present Indian context. It is at this juncture that I invoke Gandhi's *Nai Talim* (his educational and social thought). There are some obvious commonalities between Dewey and Gandhi such as the importance they attach to manual work, the high priority both give to personal initiative and self-reliance and the clarity with which they hold the basic needs of life as the prime concerns of any community life. Also, both Gandhi and Dewey advocated the idea of relating Children's activities with broader learning and intellectual concepts.

However, when one looks beyond these functional commonalities, there lies a major point of contention. The difference arises from Dewey's faith in science as a model for rationality; and Gandhi's faith that life and nature has a moral purpose. What follows is a study of Dewey's and Gandhi's educational and social thought. Both Gandhi and Dewey become significant in the 21st century for reconstructing a better education system in India; even though their views are different when it comes to the functioning of democracy and pedagogy. For Dewey, democracy finds its stimulating energy from within its functioning whereas, for Gandhi, democracy comes alive in the quest of human's urging for the divine conducted a series of pedagogical experiments with students of sociology (classes XI and XII at Bluebells School International, New Delhi, India) in learning the subject through doing (as encouraged by both Dewey and Gandhi). In other words, the idea of

learning arises from the environment and leading on to recognition and appreciation of the broader implications of the local and specific experiences. Through this, I intend to map out Dewey's and Gandhi's ideas and argue for the significance of their kind of educational practices.

Dewey and Gandhi: as Educational Thinkers

What summarized the system of John Dewey was that children "learn by doing" (Link 1962). The phrase which is often used reveals the social background and context of the American experience (Link 1962). Link points out that Americans used this phrase as the pragmatic base for their education system, "schools took up various activities, sometimes called the "project method" or the "problems approach" or the "child-centered school" – all meaning that the teachers were guided by the students' immediate questions and concerns" (Link 1962: 214). In this context, one could understand the idea of a "progressive school" where the students are free to explore, try, make, and do and most of all, with the teacher's guidance, evaluate their experience and relate to the natural and social world around them in a better manner. Similarly, Gandhi also talked about relating a child's life to her immediate social and natural environment. This was Gandhi's notion of Nai Talim that can be summarised by the phrase "Learning by living" (Link 1962). The goals that were set for education by both Dewey and Gandhi were essentially the same. According to Gandhi, it was "Self-reliance (the development of personality), self- government (the respect for democratic procedure), and community living (responsible behavior with concern for the well- being of others)" (Link 1962).

Dewey and Gandhi both laid emphasis on the idea of relating children's activities with broader notions of learning. Gandhi called it "Samavaya." Its adherents use the word "correlation." And the Western pragmatists consider "integration." A deeper study shows that in both the designs a teacher is required who is not just a subject expert, but is imaginative and creative so she can relate immediate experiences to larger ideas or concepts. It is here that we witness the weakness of both the systems of education, neither of the two seems to be successful; and at the same time, rote learning becomes the norm. In India and America, both ones is not able to transcend the rigidity of the traditional school system, resulting in a reproduction of the same schooling or kind of education that is devoid of any meaningful experience. Ineffectual teacher training is also one of the causes to be unable to put experiences or the idea of learning by doing in practice with children. Take for instance, if a "Gandhian teacher" refuses to take a question during a lecture and harshly tells the student to wait until the lecture is over, is only Gandhian in name only.

Such teachers cannot fit into the model of education that has been designed by Gandhi or Dewey since such a teacher is bereaved of sensitivity towards understanding student's doubt that may come anytime. While both the models of education, Nai Talim or American progressive education talk of overall development of a child, there is one major difference between the two – Gandhi laid stress upon work. Dewey did not. Gandhi emphasized the opportunity to learn while working, to appreciate the sources of daily bread, and to feel democracy in action through the fellowship of labor. According to Gandhi children could learn about their natural as well as their social surroundings by being a part of the processes of productive work. In other words, "education in and through work would integrate naturally the physical and social situation of children" (Link 1962). While both recognized the values of activity in the process of learning, it is Gandhi who appears to be more realistic since he began with the idea of work, the production of basic food, shelter, clothing, etc. one can argue then that the result of founding an education system on useful yet unexploited labor by children is important for both the countries – India and America. Perhaps the need and

ways for such an approach are different for each country.

In a developing country like India and in highly developed United States children should participate in necessary work. They need to be aware that all people are human beings and as such must be responsible for their personal contribution to the daily on-going of life. A country like India where problems of caste discrimination, homophobia, and communalism are growing each passing day, it becomes extremely important to evoke an education model that is based on the thoughts of Dewey and Gandhi. An education system that is work centered, teaches democracy by actions, not words.

Children learn most in an environment or school that offers them opportunities to learn from the ground up and to appreciate the combined abilities of many persons. In this context one can argue that the labor philosophy of education speaks to needs of the East and the West in the following ways:

- Children learn information or know facts best when they are from their everyday lives. When facts are presented to them in a social context, it becomes easier to grasp. For Gandhi there could be nothing closer than the need for food, shelter, and clothing; hence the more intimate the relation with the everyday life, the better the learning situation.

Democracy is a process, a “doing. In a democracy the children need to learn by doing, one must have a certain degree of empathetic understanding in order to know how a particular work is done. It is in this context one argues that children need to acquire respect for the labor or work, as well as for the laborers or workers. So unless one gets involved in gardening, one wouldn’t know the ethics of care and nurturing and the labor that a gardener puts in.

- Gandhi and Dewey both thought that while understanding and identifying with work and the worker would bring respect, empathy, and wisdom, it also results into creation of ‘we sentiment’ or a feeling for reciprocal learning.
- Lastly, societies that are plagued with problems of caste and class, an education system of this kind can be of immense help. Both Caste and Class discrimination and violence cannot survive in a society where all children shared in some way or the other some kind of necessary and useful labour. Gandhi used the term ‘Sarvodaya’ to convey the essence of his philosophy.

Both Dewey and Gandhi wanted to create a system that would truly be democratic and just. The models of education that both the thinkers gave tried to achieve precisely this, through the inclusion of all children, through creativity, and through learning by doing. It is this what is needed in our present-day society.

The Following Section Tries to Reflect Upon the Idea of Engaging With Students More Creatively Teaching Sociology to School Students

Teaching students an altogether new subject is not an easy task. This teaching requires constant reflection on the subject matter or the curriculum taught, method of teaching and the challenges one faces while engaging in the vocation of teaching.

Education must encourage independent thinking but as far as what we see in the education system, the rote learning and race for high marks, this conventional education only encourages mediocrity— creating minds which only know how to follow a crowd. I believe true education can be achieved through creativity. I try my best to give my school

students assignments which lets them be creatively free. Of course, one is bound by the system, a certain curriculum and definite protocol regarding marking and recording a student's progress. But the real challenge is, as teachers and students, how we can creatively engage with our subjects and with each other knowing our limitations. If we are able to manage that well then possibly we can create a system where knowledge and skills are used to bring out the true potential of students as well as teachers. What follows is an account of how different chapters or concepts (only a few are selected) in the school curriculum of class XI and XII in sociology in NCERT have been taught creatively encouraging critical thinking and understanding that how textual knowledge needs to be treated as a perspective rather than something value-neutral or objective knowledge.

To begin with, let me share how a chapter called in book one of sociology in class XII – The Demographic Structure of Indian Society is made interesting. The nature of the chapter is such that it is full of definitions – fertility rate, mortality rate, demographic dividend, different theories of population, and population explosion, family welfare schemes, etc. In the process of teaching this kind of a chapter, which is extremely informative and objective, it becomes difficult to retain the joy of learning. While teaching this chapter the students were divided into groups in class and after a discussion on the demographic structure in India, they were asked to make posters on population control. They studied Malthus's theory of population, demographic transition theory, family planning schemes and brought out extremely creative posters. It helped them not only understand the demographic structure of the Indian society but acknowledge that population explosion is an immediate reality of India. This particular group of students decides to make a poster for the educated as it is seen that despite modern education, families do not put a limit on the birth of (number of) children. This poster conveys a loud message and study of demography, doesn't remain dry but engages the mind and brings out the creativity in students. Following is that poster prepared by class XII students of Bluebells School International:



Figure 1

Look at another example of how Social Structure and Agency are explained to students. To introduce the concept of social structure and agency in class XI is very difficult. A teacher can begin by defining it, explaining how social structure differs from a physical structure like that of a building which is visible to the naked eye. The social structure is something which is not apparent and concrete but abstract and refers to the patterned relationships between the elements of society. In other words, social structure can be studied by observing the social interactions among people in society or it is an arrangement of institutions whereby human beings interact and live together. Studies of social structure attempt to

explain social life in terms of integration or in the context of inequality, whereby questions of social constraint exerted over the individual's agency become important. To explain how social structure constrains the individual action and how agency sometimes breaks the social structure to a student of class XI who has only begun to study sociology is a herculean task. The student loses interest, finds it boring and does not clearly understand that how social structure puts a constraint on individuals or how individuals exercise agency. Now if the teacher after explaining this is able to create a situation wherein students see the interplay between social structure and agency, the students are bound to engage in this kind of explanation. After completing the theoretical portions surrounding these concepts, the teacher must try to bring these abstract concepts closer to everyday lived life. I took the students out in the field and made them play kho-kho. The game has certain rules which all players must follow. There is a structure to the game and everyone adheres to it. It is played between two teams, each consisting of 9 to 12 players. One match has two innings each of chasing and running. One team sits in the center of the field, in a row, with adjacent members facing in opposite directions. The runners, 3 at a time, take to the field. The sitting or chasing team is supposed to take the shortest time to tag all of the players running. There are poles on each end of the row sitting, the runner can go between two players who are sitting, but the chaser is not allowed to turn back while running and go between the players sitting. Boundary lines are set and whoever steps out of it is deemed out. The rules and boundaries of the game act as a social structure. While playing the game students realize how it constrains the individual action. At the same time when some of the students decide not to play this game, they challenge the structure and exercise their agency. Immediately they understand how social structure and agency are in a dialectical relationship. Learning becomes fun and the concepts remain with the student. They understand that there is bound to be social harmony, constraints as well as conflict in society.

A chapter in NCERT textbook of class XI – *Culture and Socialisation* is made more engaging and easy to understand through a food festival conducted by the class itself. A class of forty students belonging to different cultures was asked to bring their cultural food and then asked to discuss the importance of that particular dish in their culture. There were dishes from different cultures – North Eastern, Rajasthani, Punjabi, Bengali; food from Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, etc. An activity of this kind made students not only aware of the deep connection between food and culture but it helped them understand the other's culture in a sympathetic manner. Students discussed their interpretations of culture through food and for them, Clifford Geertz became easy to understand.

A chapter on classical sociologists requires a lot of patience on the part of students as well as a teacher in the process of learning. Children are introduced to the classical thinkers – Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber and to understand their theories is not very easy. On the part of the teacher, it requires her to use a language which without complicating concepts can convey their theories. Can one use tools which help students realize the importance of theories and at the same time bridge the gap that is between theory and practice? When Marx's theory of alienation is taught, students are made to watch Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, the students understand how the workers get alienated, they appreciate Marx's criticism of the exploitative system of capitalism and ask questions regarding greed of capitalism and ask if it is such an exploitative system then why does it exist as a mode of production in the society. The creative engagement with theories makes students more interested in the subject they are learning, they become critical and reflexive and the entire process of learning becomes joyful.

Textbooks are important, as another experience emphasized. On one occasion while I was teaching, a student asked if I would make them underline important things in the textbook, and when I said probably no; the student argued

that “all of us learn differently and some of us need those underlined texts.” This is just one such occasion, on many others some students with their reflexivity had helped me see the conventional education system and beyond it, encouraging me to experiment. At the same time, the textbooks can also limit the teacher. If the teacher remains dependent only on the text then there is no reflexivity in learning. The teacher needs to not only use the text but go beyond it. This requires imagination and creativity. The role of the teacher becomes extremely significant in taking the student beyond the text. She does not remain a mere mediator between the text and the student but becomes a catalyst in invoking imagination, reflexivity, and creativity in the process of learning/education, hence a transformative role.

One of the experiments that take place in the school is wherein students nurture and take care of plants. Getting involved in gardening does provide them with not only a better sense of aesthetics but the ethic of care for the environment and nature. It also helps in build qualities of patience, seeing the plant grow; taking care of it every day results into the creation of a student who is sensitive and compassionate. What better summarises true education than this?

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to raise questions like: what do schools do to one’s life? What are the social implications of schooling and the social functions of school education? Is it possible for us to think of an alternative system of learning for creating a new society? The present-day education system delinks human concerns and the physical world. The school delinks information/fact-based education and everyday life. The need of the hour is to create an education system which combines experiences, manual labor as well as intellectual labor – on the thoughts of Dewey and Gandhi.

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