



Some thoughts from Dr Krishna Kumar



Learning Curve has been fortunate enough to be able to reproduce some thoughts on education and the relevance of Gandhiji's Nai Talim. The excerpts here are reproduced with the kind permission of Digantar, Jaipur. This article was originally published in Hindi in Vimarsh, May 1998, titled 'Buniyadi Shiksha Ki Prasangikta'. This is the third in the series of lectures held at Digantar (this lecture was held on 10th January 1998). The excerpts below have been translated to English from the same.

There are many problems in speaking about Basic Education today. The biggest problem is this - that Gandhi's name is associated with it. There are a number of popular images that have spread about Gandhiji in today's society; those images are not examined again, and there is a kind of obstinacy in looking only at what is visible at an established level, singing the praises of Gandhi's greatness, treating him like a God or deifying him. On the other hand, it is connected to the matter of him losing his way, the feeling that that road got left behind long ago. This discussion has taken other forms, one of them being that modern India is this way because it has taken Nehru's path, and Gandhiji's path would have been totally different. Or that Gandhiji was wrong in choosing Nehru. The moment any discussion of an idea connected to Gandhiji starts, the questions arise again, that we have to make people understand the sanctity of the form the idea had initially been thought of in the circumstances of 50-60 years ago, and a long lecture starts right there. You cannot bear to listen to it, unless you are a Gandhivaadi, or you are interested in such discussions. In today's circumstances, this idea is not very easy.

I myself, as a child, studied in a school that employed the principles of Basic Education. I cannot look back on the years in which I received

this education with objectivity, because as you go farther and farther from childhood, you cannot view it scientifically. It gets bound in memories. So I am not saying that I am speaking from experience. But it is necessary for me to point out that not only have I seen such schools, but I am from such a school. And there have been hundreds and thousands of schools all over the country, and many among them still exist in some form or the other. Some exist in name only, but in some, we get to see Basic Education in some expanded form. If all of us show some interest in it, it will be possible to make a little effort to understand the overall form of such organizations. Then, it will help construct a better idea in your mind, than if I tell you anything. I have come here today to create a very small image, and to bring out and show you its inherent beauty, and I would like to start doing that now.

In the last 50-60 years, the proposal of Basic Education has been seeing its reflection in several ways in the philosophy of education, and in the methods used in the philosophy of education. It is not as if this matter has been actually specified in the proposal of Basic Education. But in the philosophy of education, and especially in articles written on this subject in the meantime, Basic Education has a presence somewhere or the other - not only in India but in other countries too. By the way there was nothing in the proposal of Basic Education that was something unique that Gandhiji plucked from nowhere. What he said was relevant to general life.

Three major things have been associated with the idea of Basic Education from the beginning. These three thoughts are now so familiar to us that the danger lies in us thinking that, "Arrey, we know all this, what is so novel about it?" And this can really be said that we have heard the echoes of the proposal of Basic Education in so many forms, that to separate it out, or to speak about its specialities separately, is unnecessary, and possibly even useless.....That's why I've given you these various warnings. In the world of philosophy, no idea is old, nor does it remain what it had been initially - both these things have to be kept in mind. Be it a 2500-year old idea, be it Buddha's or Aristotle's idea, be it an idea that has been introduced in our society just now - the idea never becomes old, even if not one, but a thousand generations have tried it, and even if they have opined that they tried it out and not found anything of substance in it! Even then, the idea has a glow. On the other hand, no idea remains what it had originally been when it was first proposed, because during that time, it would have lived in several other ideas. That experience of the ability of the idea to progress beyond its creation, continuously makes the idea reappoint itself in the panorama.

The three points are - One, working with hands should be taught at school. Two, education at school must be in association with the milieu. Very simple things. And the third - whatever is taught at school, whatever skills are encouraged, whatever aspects of knowledge are brought to the children - they should not be separate, but unified/holistic. They should be interconnected. These three things - work, the importance of local surroundings, and the effort to make the syllabus holistic have been put into practice somewhere or the other, in some context or the other, in different parts of the country, or at the state-level. Probably the only thing necessary to add here is that the third point in the original proposal of Basic Education by Gandhiji was raised in connection with handicraft. He didn't raise this concept of holistic form in the context of any ideology, nor in a psychological context, but in the context of handicraft/manual skills. Because his first point about working with hands in school wasn't that

you should also work with hands in school, but that the school should be centred on working with hands. It has to be so important that the other traditional treatments of school, involving different kinds of education and skill, all those have to be marginalized, become secondary, and the focus has to be on the handicrafts - not necessarily one handicraft, but definitely on one traditional handicraft. It will be good if that handicraft is such that it is available in the school's environment. That handicraft should be the central industry of the school and the different areas of the knowledge of the surroundings are interwoven into the syllabus and we can give this woven fabric the name of holistic education in the context of Basic Education. This interweaving is not a concept of universal psychology of the child's personality, nor is it a national ideology, but this interweaving has to come out of that skill which has been chosen as the central industry of the school. There were many other approaches, and the mention of all of them is not necessary. Especially the approach of productivity - if you run your eyes over history, other approaches were given importance but this central matter wasn't given importance. You will have heard in schools about "Work Experience" or some other things which have been put under "Socially Useful Productive Work," every word of which you can view with suspicion. All these things have come into being after employing the approach of Basic Education, and then included in its memory into the syllabus and is still going on. So it is not necessary to discuss all the approaches because all those are existing in some form or the other on the basis of the original proposal. Like this, the importance of the mother tongue was included. When you talk about local milieu, the mother-tongue logically comes into it, and needn't be mentioned. But yet, Gandhiji gave it importance and mentioned it again. In the original proposal, there was a definite importance to this, and it was in the context that if education was to be sowed in the surroundings, the mother tongue was the only natural option in front of us.

These three points which were a part of the original proposal of Basic Education, I have laid

before you only for the sake of registering it. Without throwing a historical kind of look again and again on a time gone by, we have to probe this proposal, in the spirit of simple analysis - or rather, not to probe it but to evaluate it, that how will Basic Education look today in the main contexts of education, if it is adorned, lit up and shown? If that tree is planted here in Digantar, what kind of leaves will grow from it? What kind of flowers will possibly grow? What are the measures to be taken to keep it safe, and blooming and fruiting? All these arguments can emerge from that.

From childhood itself we want the child to appreciate the greatness of certificates, so from class one itself they start receiving certificates. We want children to understand the significance of bells - the moment the bell rings; you have to stop doing one work and start another. The bell means that someone, someone stronger than us is telling us that you shouldn't do this work, no matter how much interest it is arousing in you. Now do that for which the bell has been rung. So bells start ringing, and as they ring, they leave us in a state where we consider the bell the symbol of being initiated into a bell-centric society. A real bell is one that doesn't give us any freedom. From the past 300 years, the bell of the industrial system has been a powerful means to tie us up. The modern school, in order to make children understand that bell, starts ringing the bell from age 3-4 itself, because of which, by the time they reach the age of 18-20 years, they are used to the bell.

After speaking in the context of children, I now want to talk about teachers. Among the main ideas inherent in Basic Education is the skill we can expect from children, the kind of responsibility they can take on, and what is suitable for them, and possible for them, and that it is not wrong to give them responsibility. Let them make anything with their hands which is related to a skill found in their milieu. Let them gain expertise in any skill they learn, and enjoy the feeling of being equipped with the resources they get from this expertise - that I can do this and that I did it myself. You have to view all these

qualities in the context of the teacher too. They should know what they can do and be aware of the richness of their resources, and they should be able to say that "I can do this". Even if in the basic proposal of Basic Education, work is mainly defined in terms of handicraft, there is no reason why we should not define work in a greater context. After all, Basic Education's ideas are basically related to life's work. Work that helps in living life. Life cannot be lived without doing all that work in the specified way, with expertise. Keeping children included in the work involving responsibility right from the beginning is the idea of Basic Education. Responsibility can be given in such work, right from the start. That is why we can define that work wholeheartedly. Whether it is the cleaning of a school, whether it is a toilet that has to be maintained, to arrange for water if there is a water tank or if there is no water in school - all these are small kinds of work, but today's education system is not making any kind of effort towards including these kinds of work in the curriculum.

The 6th survey of NCERT has been released recently. Looking at the 3rd, 4th and the 5th surveys, one can assess the progress made in the last ten years. No one, other than those working in NCERT, would feel proud of the progress made in respect of the availability of water, urinals and the blackboards. The moment anyone enters a primary school, these things are clearly noticeable. Even today we keep on saying that more than half of the schools cannot show a place where a child can make use of a urinal with dignity. In our constitution there is an article 395 which says that the guiding principle of the state will be to ensure that the children lead a life of respect and dignity. I keep wondering how one would feel going around a school after realising that he himself has no proper facility to use the urinals in the bus stand of Alwar. Problems about urinals and toilets have persisted for the last 50 years. If one starts pondering upon these issues one won't be surprised that Ms Madhuri Sahay, a great teacher, has given so much emphasis on the construction of toilets and maintenance of their cleanliness that she have even designated it as a separate skill by itself. You must also be surely aware of the importance of toilets in the

life of Gandhiji. The central theme of his political agenda was how to improve the lives of those castes which are invariably linked to the toilets. Will the present state of affairs continue, in which the entire toilet related work and the associated compulsions are part of the earlier caste system? Or should such work come in the domain of general work? It is as important to be as much independent in these activities as being able to earn one's livelihood after earning a degree. As far as the teacher is concerned, such initiatives become essential to run a school. In all these efforts, the role of initiative, independence and resourcefulness are inherent in the spirit of basic education.

A large-scale programme is in place to provide meals in schools. We have run it like a major responsibility providing special, trained staff for it for carrying out their job efficiently. From the point of view of basic education it is a challenge to prepare a teacher in a way that he feels empowered and can organize and provide all the material required for mid-day meal. He should not be compelled to procure these items only from certain vendors or certain companies. He should not be made fully dependent upon government grant or compulsions. He should be able to provide all the resources and materials identified by the modern scientific education in a tasteful and aesthetic way.

The environment of the old system of education, while it gave importance to being resource-rich, never tried to teach the aspects of beauty and aesthetics. This fact has been observed at a number of places. A sense of beauty, for instance, in organizing things in a way which reflects simple beauty. A tradition of bad and indifferent craftsmanship is deeply entrenched in the old system. The essence of a skill in the context of making a handicraft or writing a book is to create an object of beauty. If we want to broaden its domain, making it a part of this Basic Education, a teacher, entrusted with running a school, should be trained to instil in him a sense of aesthetics in the upkeep of a school using his own ideas.

Of what can the base of education be? Keeping it as our theme, we need to proceed to look at the

subject matter. We can find a way if we look at it from the point of view of psychology. I had dealt with it in brief and in a rather unjustified way. It will follow that the base has to be the personality of the child. Basic Education should mean an education which lays the groundwork of the personality of the child. It would invariably contain all the approaches and biases inherent in the perception of the child as per psychology. Childhood is a stage when the personality of the child takes shape and the child steps into adulthood. His preparation for it should have been completed. There is a conflict and duality between the child and life so also between child and the society. There is already a conflict between an individual and the society too. Keeping all of this in mind we have to create a base which helps the child to live in the society.

In the case of basic education, the matter is simple because the whole thing is about the collective experience of the children. If we need to know about the trees, information can be gathered by studying the trees in the vicinity in various seasons. Knowledge thus gathered can be considered as valid in the context of Basic Education. This then can be supplemented with other types of knowledge which could be considered as a special knowledge which is not having any direct connection to the society and the personality. It is only in the context of the creation of society that basic education is really basic. Not only in the context of personality but also for renewal of the society. There is denial of the colonial world in the life and thoughts of Gandhi. There was a big dissent in his thoughts. Basic Education cannot be called basic if dissent is not taught in it and this was a big lacuna which remained in the Basic Education policy which emerged during 20 to 30 years after the independence. There was absolutely no place for dissent in it. No scope was left for any issues where there could have been a possibility of conflict between the government and the society.

What should be the role of the government in respect to Basic Education? Ultimately, Basic Education is nothing but a loud declaration of the autonomy of the society. It is a challenge to the government to cordially and honourably

coordinate with the society. Basic Education has inherently a competing relation with the politics and the decisions taken by the political system. It makes sense to think that if basic education system cannot prepare the students to express dissent with the existing environment then the system itself is flawed. If the education trains us to live in the world of today, it follows that the world cannot be changed and we have to continue to live the way the world is. We have to acquire the means of livelihood and the qualities required for living. If servitude is needed, we

learn it. If competition is essential for living then we learn to compete. With this present system the world cannot be changed. If the basic education has to be in line with the Gandhian tradition, right of dissent has to be accepted in the spirit of religious fervour. I am not doomed to live life as it is but I can make it the way I want. During my lifetime I am capable of changing the world as much as the world has changed me.

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