



Nai Talim Today: Some Issues and Possibilities

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School and Society

To understand Gandhi's educational ideas one has to explicitly keep Dewey's following quote in mind "We will know what type of education to provide, if we know what type of society we want".

Here is how one could state Gandhi's vision of ideal society: most people will live in small villages, work in agriculture or cottage industries, either family owned or owned and managed cooperatively. All kinds of work will have equal status. There will be high degree of village and regional economic self-sufficiency with low amount of goods being transported over large distances. Villages will be politically autonomous, able to take most decisions themselves through participatory, face-to-face, democracy. There will be large degree of equity and all kinds of domination-discrimination will be reduced. Everyone will be eco-literate, practice the 4Rs (reduce-reuse-recycle-regenerate) and live as per the Gandhian dictum of *'there is sufficiency in the world for man's need, but not for man's greed'* and it is only with such limits to wealth along with equity that envy and conflict will be reduced, leading to peace and truth, the two supreme Gandhian ideals.

Nai Talim or New Education, with hands-on productive work as the central pedagogic tool, was one of Gandhi's chief instruments to realize this above vision. And as per the vision stated above --- grappling with equity, justice, sustainability had to be one of the main concerns of its curriculum.

Would any progressive person in the 1940s to 1970s have believed in such 'backward' looking ideals? Most believed exactly the opposite and India as well as the world enthusiastically mounted the horse of Industrialism. Almost all progressive thought was on how to make this horse run faster and faster. The dominant discourse was whether Capitalism with a human face, or some variant of Socialism-

Communism, or some magical mixture of both, would do the trick.

In a simplified manner one can state the basic tendencies of Industrialism as: most people will live in cities and towns, work in large factories and offices, either owned by huge corporates or governments. There will inevitably be large differences in status of work and positions. Everything will be connected with everything: goods and services will be distributed and marketed over large distances through massive use of transportation. Most decisions will be taken by nation-states through representative democracy. Continuous upward economic mobility, ever increasing material wealth, greed and envy will be the main human motivating forces. Therefore, to dominate nature and extract as much as possible and as quickly as possible will be the main task of human knowledge and political-economic systems.

This was accomplished with the help of a standardised schooling system whose 'not so hidden curriculum' was to drill into everyone the aspiration of upward mobility and unlimited material wealth so as to accelerate the onward march of Industrialism. This schooling has pretty much spread all over the world and in one sense it has been quite successful. Even those whose school achievements are visibly quite low or incomplete and those who do not have proper access to this schooling have fully imbibed its above stated core aim. Readers should see how wonderfully Shri Narayan Desai says this in his introduction to Anil Sadgopal's Nai Talim lectures in Gujarat Vidyapith in Dec 2011.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_rgDaARGgk

"From the 1980s it is becoming clearer to more and more people that this horse of Industrialism on which we are mounted has gone out of control, endangering the very survival of (human) life. We

don't seem to be able to turn it any way, we cannot slow it down and we are unable to dismount. And we are fast approaching the edge of the cliff. From the 1980s onwards almost all countries have been getting together to figure what can be done, who should accept the 'blame' and bear the 'costs'. While there have been some decent moves to control the pace of this madly rushing horse, many believe that they are too few and maybe too late. But even now the majority are going about hoping that somehow they will not be affected by the crisis, or this crisis does not exist, or it is not as acute as many are saying, or with some magic it will disappear. Maybe the world, in order to be galvanized into action, needs a shock like the one Gandhi received in Pietermaritzburg railway station on 7 June 1893 when he was pushed out of the train."

Once India decided to embark on this journey of catching up with the 'successful' industrialised world and, in the basic essentials, do exactly the opposite of what Gandhi had envisioned, *Nai Talim* was as good as dead. There have been some analysis of how curriculum of *Nai Talim* was not designed properly; how very limited 'activities' were chosen, how difficult it was to do 'correlation' of subjects with work - activities, how school routine was too rigid, how difficult it was to train the 'teachers' (and very few were actually trained), how unhelpful were the government support systems, etc. All of the above are important. But my claim is that even if these things were done reasonably well (and they were done well in Gujarat and in some other parts of India), once we were hooked to Industrialism, *Nai Talim* would have inevitably collapsed, at the most lasting one decade longer than it actually did.

Worldwide and in India, more and more people are getting convinced that 20th century industrialism has run its course. More and more people are starting to earnestly look for political, economic, technological, cultural alternatives. It appears that many of Gandhi's ideas, including *Nai Talim*, are finding a new lease of life. These would obviously have to be re-interpreted as per today's and tomorrow's problems and requirements, just as Gandhi had done so brilliantly with many inherited ideas and concepts.

The following paragraphs will talk only about some

of the issues, a few possible features, and challenges of this renewed *Nai Talim* of the future.

Rural–Urban

Many recent writings talk about how the pace of urbanization in India will continue as before and even accelerate. And various studies show how rural youth and also their parents are not interested in continuing with agriculture and allied activities. Therefore in future (after 30-40 years) villages will just be a footnote in India just as it happened to the first-world nations as industrialisation rolled across the world. But such a scenario is probably too simplistic a straight line extrapolation of the past. On the other hand, if we think that the search for alternatives to 20th century Industrialism will pick up, then making villages desirable places to live and work might increasingly become mainstream agenda.

Although Gandhi did not have many good things to say about cities, it might be instructive to see how Tagore talked about harmonious city-village existence, which according to him had been disrupted by Industrialism's quest for unlimited material wealth. In his poetic language here is how he described a possibility:

"Streams, lakes and oceans are there on this earth. They exist not for the hoarding of water exclusively within their own areas. They send up the vapour which forms into clouds and helps towards a wider distribution of water. Cities have their functions of maintaining wealth and knowledge in concentrated forms of opulence, but this also, should not be for their own sake; they should be centers of irrigation; they should gather in order to distribute. They should not magnify themselves, but should enrich the whole commonwealth. They should be like lamp posts, and the light they support must transcend their own limits.

Such a relationship of mutual benefit between the city and the village can remain strong only so long as the spirit of cooperation and self-sacrifice is a living ideal in society. When some universal temptation overcomes this ideal, when some selfish passion gains ascendancy, then a gulf is formed and goes on widening between them" ("City and Village", The English writings of Tagore, Sahitya Academy)

Often when *Nai Talim* is discussed, it is assumed that this is something which may be applicable to rural areas, but has very little to do with cities. But today it is clear that cities are half the reality and will expand further for some years. Quite a few cities worldwide have embarked on innovative ways to move towards sustainability and are trying to reduce their carbon footprint in an equitable manner. Some like Curitiba in Brazil are even trying to ‘irrigate’ neighbouring villages as Tagore had dreamt of. Therefore today's *Nai Talim* has to be both for rural and urban areas and also strive to bring about this urban-rural balance and harmony.

No one wants to do agriculture and stay in villages

One of my colleagues and I had recently (August 2014) visited a north-western district of Madhya Pradesh where displaced forest people, tribals and non-tribals, have been given 2 hectares of land each, new villages have been established, and government schools opened in each village. A central small village in that area has an excellent school till Class XII run by an NGO. What was quite surprising that most of the land in August was not cultivated, although some was. Each 2 hectare land seemed to have one or two quite good looking trees; but only one or two. When my colleague spoke to Class X students about the future, they said that they would do Class XI-XII, then they would go to college, then nothing! They also said that they knew very well that at best there were “jobs” for only one out of 10 persons. Interestingly Madhya Pradesh has an “agriculture” stream in XI-XII and all students of this school opted for it as it was the easiest to pass. We found, as expected, that this had nothing to do with actual agriculture; the idea was to make students memorize the easiest probable questions so that they would somehow manage to pass XII. And imagine there were these 2 hectares of unutilized land!!!

As per government of India data, out of 140 million hectares of cropped land, only 55 million hectares are cropped more than once. That means 85 million hectares are cropped only once! Incidentally these are often the poorest distressed rural areas of India. Today there are enough models in almost all agro climatic and geographical areas of India showing that with “advanced scientific ecological” methods the total bio-production of such lands can be

increased 2-3 fold. Note that “bio” refers to not just human food crops but includes fuel, fiber, fodder, fertilizers, timber, animals, fish other minor tree produce. This is quite different from how industrial agriculture measures production. Even in the geographical area mentioned in the previous paragraph, the same NGO running the school has demonstrated that 2 hectares can make a family quite prosperous through proper water harvesting and integrated farming.

In this context, it is worthwhile looking at what happened in Cuba just 20-25 years back. In 1989 after the collapse of Soviet Union it actually fell off the cliff! It had the world’s highest level of industrial agriculture, with more chemical use and mechanization per hectare than California, and then overnight all these inputs vanished. From an average food consumption of 2600 calories in 1989, it came down to starvation levels of 1600 calories in 1993 and USA gloated over its imminent demise. But by 1998 the food consumption was back to 2600 calories!! For our purpose it is important to note the kinds of “new knowledge” Cuba had to find, tinker with, re-learn, innovate with, and apply. This list would include old and new crop rotation, companion crops, intercropping, organic soil nutrients, biological fertilisers, all kinds of non-chemical plant protection measures, trying out new kind of ploughs and non-fuel mechanical devices. In 1997 there were 2344 trainings drawing 64,279 participants to learn how to use oxen for ploughing as there were only 50,000 oxen in 1990. By year 2000 there were 400,000 oxen! And there was reverse migration of educated youth from cities to villages!

To sum up, one of the challenges for the *Nai Talim* of the future in both rural and urban areas (urban agriculture is growing in some cities at a nice pace; by 2004, Havana city was producing four million tons of fruits and vegetables annually) is how to design the learning of core subjects through various age appropriate natural resource management work-activities. There is a vast range of experience worldwide from which one can learn. If done properly, the resulting understanding of ecological sciences will not be any less exciting and rewarding than the physical and biological sciences taught for the last one century in schools worldwide.

The other extremely important thing which *Nai Talim* has to deal with is the issue of equity and justice. The challenge is how to bring up these issues again and again in an age appropriate and sensitive manner. Especially when coming up with 'productive work' related to natural resource management, the question of equitable redistribution of land; and shifting away from individual assets to community assets, to the commons, is something which has to be integrated into *Nai Talim* lessons. Without this *Nai Talim* will be meaningless.

***Nai Talim*, decentralization and local self-government**

Gandhi had spoken about schools being financially self-sufficient through the sales of the goods produced by students. Predictably almost everyone protested pointing out the various pitfalls of this. But maybe in today's context, we can take that spirit and reinterpret it as - schools not only are a place in which children get educated and made ready for higher studies and training and eventually future economically productive life, but they should also contribute to their local society in various ways as part of their curriculum and in some sense give back to society as much as they receive.

In rural areas, often the schools till Class VIII or X or XIII have the largest physical infrastructure, large

number of teachers and most important, hundreds of youth spending a large part of their day and a very creative part of their lives in these schools. So why shouldn't the community and society get more out of this storehouse of resources?

Suppose a wave of decentralization, participatory democracy, and meaningful local governance intensifies. This would require local area planning, which would require baseline surveys, local resource surveys, local monitoring requiring periodic surveys and feedbacks, impact surveys, data analysis and usable presentation of such data etc. School students and teachers together can do this as an integral part of their curriculum.

There are at least two reasons why this is very important. Firstly, today in India we cannot envisage elected panchayat members in general having the above stated capabilities and, secondly, their numbers will never be sufficient to be able to do all the tasks required for this systematic local area planning and implementation. There is often talk of what the local government can do about quality education in their areas. We are completing the loop by asking what a school should be doing for quality local governance and development work. And this synergistic relationship between school and local government could be defined as excellent *Nai Talim* in today's context.

Productive work in *Nai Talim* today

Ideally, productive work in *Nai Talim* should satisfy as many of the following criteria as possible:



Here is a possible list of themes which could serve as *Nai Talim* concerns today. This is by no means an exhaustive one. Needless to say, the exact activities within these themes would be contextual, that is, local specific.

1. natural resource management & bio-diversity: sustainable agriculture, trees, animal husbandry, fishery, forest-based
2. agro processing : food, fiber, crafts
3. energy: bio, solar, chulha, wind, electricity use efficiency
4. water & sanitation: collection, storage, testing, purification, wastage, recycling
5. waste: segregation, recycling,
6. health & nutrition: hygiene, cooking, malnutrition , herbs
7. construction: mud, bamboo
8. bicycle & pedal power
9. local (socio-economic) survey: studies including monitoring of government schemes

How to take *Nai Talim* forward today

In recent years many states have shown an eagerness to restart vocational education from Class IX under the newly formed National Skills Qualifications Framework. But as NCF 2005 it pains to point out again and again, *Nai Talim* is not vocational education: *Nai Talim* is using productive work as one of the main pedagogic tools to teach all the subjects right from Class I leading to harmonious development of the head, the hand and the heart.

Bihar is the only state whose government has recently taken a decision to revive around 390 *Nai Talim* schools.

The various articles in this issue show that, over the last two decades, some 'alternative' schools in various parts of India have tried to incorporate productive work in their schools or in their educational work. If we look at the themes mentioned above, there are many people and organizations all over India who are working on these themes and have developed excellent models working with adults, but, barring a few exceptions, have so far not ventured to try to teach them to school students. A possible strategy is to bring such 'development practitioners' and 'alternative school educationists' together. Moreover, many of these are also potential resource institutions if any state decides to experiment with *Nai Talim*. The Azim Premji Foundation has in its own small way started some experiments in its six schools.

As pointed out at the beginning of this article , the apprehension remains that if the community around a school is fully committed to following classical Industrialism the lure and momentum of which are still quite strong , what is the point in trying *Nai Talim* in that local school ? Will it survive? As Amit from Adharshila School in Badwani district of Madhya Pradesh says, "It is better to try out such *Nai Talim* experiments in communities and areas where there is already a people's movement searching and trying out alternatives to Industrialism".

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