

Transforming Adversity Into Prosperity – Application Of Gandhian Thought To Higher Education

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Abstract

In the midst of the pandemic, we would all agree that world leaders and all of humankind are trying to engage with ways of rebuilding the society from the grassroots after the unprecedented change that COVID 19 has brought on the society. In these uncertain times, the values of freedom, equality, justice and brotherhood would serve to give a strong direction to the construction of a new social order/a new society. Lessons from our history could show us the way forward in this reconstruction as these times are similar in many ways to the times of reconstruction of society post-independence.

As a new democratic society was established post-independence, our founders of the constitution looked to education as an instrument of social transformation and to make democratic values a reality for every individual. Mahatma Gandhi was one such philosopher who believed in education as an instrument of social transformation. However, the question that we often ask ourselves is; whether these thoughts and philosophies are relevant even today in a neoliberal, post-colonial era after 73 years of independence? The paper looks at the relevance of the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi in the field of Higher Education. The paper briefly looks at the mission of Higher Education and then attempts to address the question of the relevance of Gandhiji's philosophy in the areas of Conceptions of knowledge, Concept of Curriculum and Teacher and Learner in Higher Education.

This will be done by highlighting contemporary discourses in these areas and seeing how Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy informs praxis in our times.

Introduction

The UN General Secretary António Guterres (@antonioguterres) tweeted at 6:00 AM on Sun, Jul 19, 2020 :

#COVID19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built.

It has reinforced the need for solidarity more strongly than ever.

We belong to each other.

We stand together, or we fall apart.

Worldwide leaders, as well as common men and women alike, are trying to make sense of ways in which the world is trying to rebuild itself from the grassroots after the unprecedented change that COVID 19 has brought on the society. In the midst of this pandemic, we would all agree that there is a need for the reconstruction of society based on reflection. A new society that is built on values of freedom, equality, justice and brotherhood is struggling to be born. These times are similar in many ways to the times of reconstruction of society post-independence. As a new democratic society was established, our founding fathers looked to education as an instrument of social transformation and an instrument to make democratic values a reality for every individual. Education, as we see today, owes much to the thoughts and philosophy of great thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi, Tagore, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Tilak and many more. The question that we often ask ourselves is whether these thoughts, philosophies of these great thinkers are relevant even today in a neoliberal, post-colonial era after 73 years of independence and in the times when the world is ravaged by a pandemic which has affected all facets of the society?

For this discourse, we will look at the thoughts and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, our Father of the Nation and see how this is relevant for us in Higher Education. The reason for situating the discourse in the space of higher education is that

the Universities have been conceived as the "*sanctuaries of the inner life of the nation.*" by its role and functions.

Dr. Radhakrishnan, philosopher-scholar, produced the first Report on Higher Education in free India in 1948 . Excerpts from the report in sections of University says that; "*The academic problem has assumed new shapes. We have now a wider conception of the duties and responsibilities of universities. They have to provide leadership in politics and administration, the professions, industry and commerce. They have to meet the increasing demand for every type of higher education, literary and scientific, technical and professional.*"

If India is to confront the confusion of our time, she must turn for guidance, not to those who are lost in the mere exigencies of the passing hour, but to her men of letters, and men of science, to her poets and artists, to her discoverers and inventors. These intellectual pioneers of civilization are to be found and trained in the universities, which are the sanctuaries of the inner life of the nation."

Mahatma Gandhiji's vision on education was for the individual and the betterment of society, country and the world. His experience of South-Africa not only changed his world view but also challenged him to commit his life to transform India and the world at large. Situating Higher Education in this context, it is all of us, the privileged, who are a part of the 26.3% of the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education have the greater responsibility to allow this education that we have received to be self-transformative and in turn transforming societies that we are a part of.

After looking at the mission that we are involved within the sector of higher education, we would now attempt to address the question of relevance in the areas of

- Conceptions of knowledge
- Concept of Curriculum
- Teacher and Learner in Higher Education

Conceptions of Knowledge

The ultimate objective of education as envisioned by Gandhiji is not only a for a balanced and harmonious individual (Head, Heart and Hand) but also a balanced and harmonious society – a just society where nothing divides the haves and have-nots and everybody is assured of getting their basic needs satisfied and the right to Freedom. This provides the basis for understanding the concept of knowledge, according to Gandhiji. Knowledge evolved from the activity of the child in society. That was the basis of the Nai Talim and the Wardha scheme of education. Children learn by doing, and in doing, their educational and economic needs are fulfilled. When children learn based on craft and societal engagement, education does not alienate the individual. But gives worth and value to every child, the village child and the urban child alike.

For Gandhiji, Education, meant an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man-body, mind and spirit. For fulfilling this aim, literacy was a means and not the end of education. He went on to say that literacy in itself is no education at all. He recommended that a child's education should begin with teaching of handicrafts. (Harijan,1937)

Therefore, Knowledge for Gandhiji was not limited to declarative knowledge, which is factual information but the knowledge that is valuable, the knowledge that can be connected to the students' experience in order to be remembered and used. He recommended procedural knowledge; that is, information about how to perform a task related to day to day life and, most importantly, conditional knowledge of "when," "why," and "under what conditions" declarative and procedural knowledge should be used. A knowledge that is anchored on this type of thinking will contribute to an individual being more reliant, relevant to its society and being able to solve/deal with any situation with confidence. It is this kind of knowledge that even prepares the individual to face ambiguity and uncertainty with confidence. This was reflected in his ideas of basic education. Today we see that this kind of knowledge is what the contemporary thinkers opine. The model of students' intellectual progression, as advocated by Entwistle, Noel. (2007) as shown in the diagram below, it is a reflection of an understanding of how University students progress to reach the sophisticated concept of knowledge. It

also brings out the need for inculcating a commitment to relativist conceptions of knowledge, which was what Gandhiji visualized.

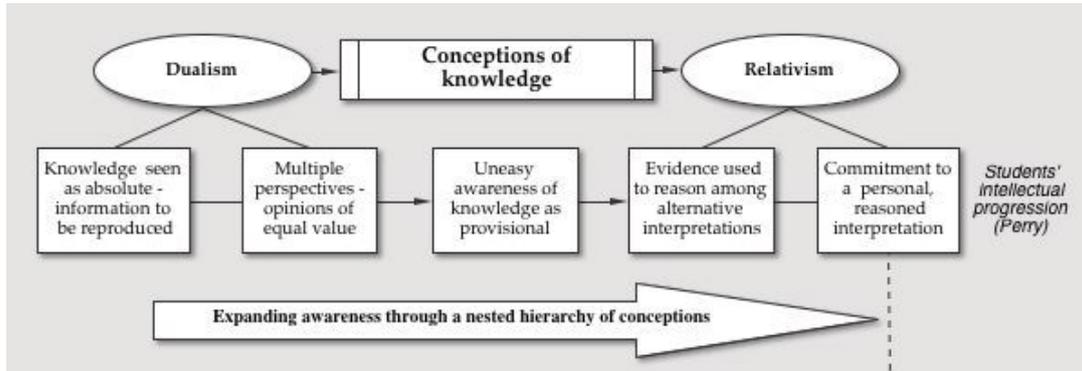


Fig. 1: Conception of Knowledge

This is an example of the potential of the philosophy of education and more specifically, the philosophy of Education of Mahatma Gandhi. It has mobilized thoughts and attempts of educationists to find answers to questions about what is worth teaching and learning? What is knowable, and what should an individual do with education? Attempting to answer these questions has been the concern of educationalists who have tried to find ways to reach the ideals of philosophers. Our National Curriculum Framework 2005, too, envisioned education using procedural and conditional knowledge as propagated by Gandhiji.

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 of the Government of India opines that it is the child's community and local environment that are significant spaces where learning takes place. It is in this space that the child interacts with the environment and derives meaning for his/her existence which is nothing but knowledge generation. Therefore, the policy urges education to blur these boundaries between the space of education and the schools. It goes on to build on the notion that strengthening and capitalising on students' knowledge which they pick up by relating to the world is what will give them the meaningful learning experiences. This kind of knowledge that is gained by doing activities is nothing but building the procedural and conditional knowledge that is lasting and pragmatic. Education has been called to strive to focus and celebrate this kind of knowledge.

Pandemic times have forced us to rethink and revisit our ways of living and thinking. Mere declarative knowledge is no longer enough, for adapting and thriving in the New Normal, higher education would need to emphasise on procedural and conditional knowledge to equip learners to create a new social order.

Concept of Curriculum

Generally speaking, the term 'curriculum' refers to a variety of things. A simplistic summarization of the term curriculum is; the vision of the capabilities and values that every individual must have; and a socio-political and cultural vision for the society. In curriculum studies, the moral, political and ideological aims behind the various conceptualizations of curriculum have been studied for decades. The curriculum relates to the knowledge, skills and understanding that are to be mastered (rather than to rules of conduct within the school, for example) and the sequence in which they are to be taught. In addition, it is related to the whole phase of education rather than to individual lessons or even group lessons. The curriculum could then be defined as the prescribed content of knowledge, understanding and skill that fulfils the aims of education. Winch, C. (1996).

Therefore, the curriculum is the vision of society for its young. It is formed based on a process of negotiations. In this section, the focus will be on the model for approaches to curriculum studies and discuss how the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi informs and challenges us to look at curriculum more holistically. The researches in the area of curriculum studies reflect this notion of different approaches to understanding curriculum. It is against this model that we would see how Gandhiji had positioned his conceptualization of the curriculum.

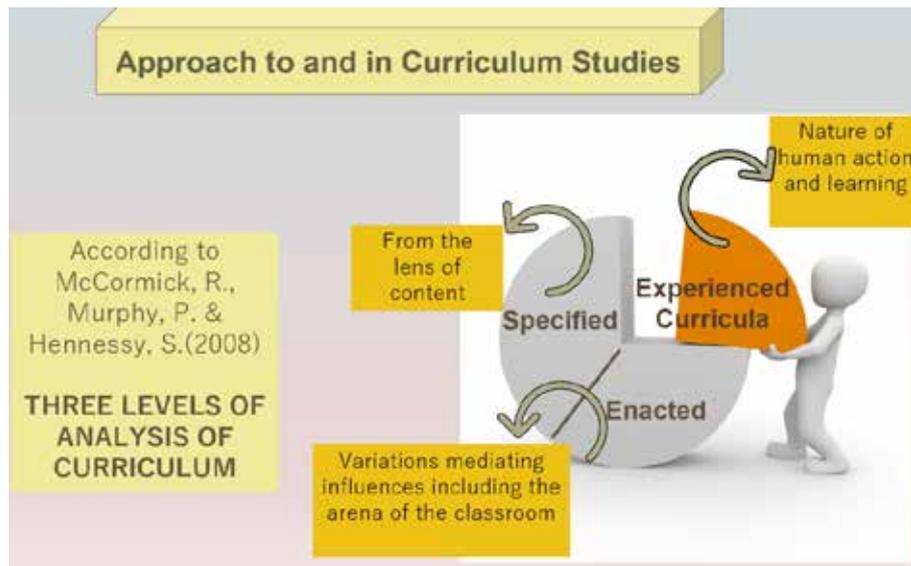


Fig. 2. Approach to and in Curriculum Studies

For Gandhiji, the curriculum was not restricted to content alone. Curriculum as equal to syllabus and content was a narrow understanding of what schooling should provide. This approach of looking at curriculum as content in Mc Cromik's approach (2008) to understanding the curriculum is termed as the specified curriculum. At the specified curriculum level, Gandhiji's philosophy gives much thought for the principles guiding the choice of basic craft, art and health. On the other hand, the enacted curriculum relates to the way in which the prescribed curriculum is actualised in classroom practices. He then moved on to recommend that experiences should be provided that would be rich in educational possibilities and have scope for cooperative activity. That is the domain of content transactions in classroom spaces. He also emphasized that a proper place must be given to the planning and evaluation of every undertaking; there must be room for initiative; children must learn to take personal responsibility for their progress. These aspects of his thoughts are related to the experienced curriculum domain. It is here that curriculum should not only be concerned with what and how content is transacted but also with the experiences of students and teachers. These experiences should be captured and evaluated.

As time went on, there was a growing consensus that craft which best met these requirements were those most closely concerned with the basic needs of

human life, the production and preparation of food and clothing, the use of clay and wood to provide both shelter and the tools and utensils of daily living. So even today, we see that if this concept of craft is accepted, there is a growing demand not only in the academic circles but also from the stakeholders that the curriculum should be closely related to the needs of society and the ownership of the curriculum should rest with the teachers and students. It calls for autonomy and distinctness in approach to curriculum construction. It is only when students of higher education are equipped with critical skills of thinking that arises from the procedural and conditional knowledge or relative conceptions of knowledge that they will be empowered enough to take ownership and be involved in their own curricula. This is a challenge in a society that is, on one hand, striving to bring in homogeneity on one hand and an over-emphasis on individualism, on the other hand.

This relationship between the notions of conceptions of knowledge and ownership within the space of curriculum and has been put diagrammatically in the figure given below.

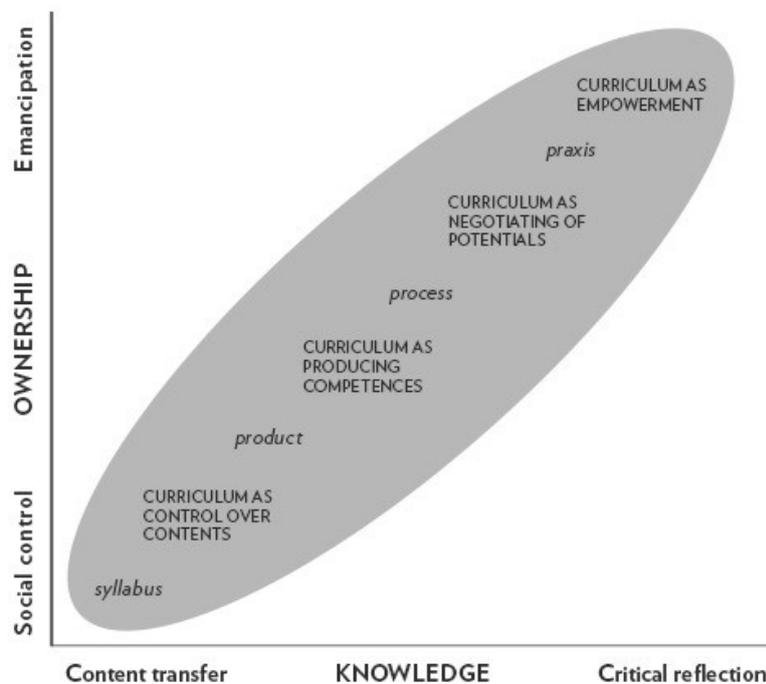


Figure 10.1 Framework for conceptualising curriculum approaches.

Fig.3: Framework of Conceptualising Curriculum Approaches

Relating Gandhiji's thoughts to conceptualizing the frameworks of curriculum approaches, we see that his thoughts on curriculum are spread into the domains of the enacted and the experienced curriculum as well. He encouraged a lot of evaluation, initiation and experiences that would build the praxis aspect of the teaching-learning process. Gandhiji's philosophy even today implores us as educationalists in Higher Education to reflectively look at ways in which the prescribed, enacted and experienced curriculum could be made emancipating, liberating and transforming. A curriculum which is experienced and dynamically rooted in the needs of the society would be flexible to accommodate the radical changes needed in the present times to help our youth overcome the economic, intellectual and emotional challenges posed by the COVID and post COVID world.

Teacher and Learner in Higher Education

Every individual is precious, and every learner is precious, every teacher is precious is the message that is communicated to those delve deeper into Gandhiji's writings. For him, education should help, prepare, nurture and lead the learner towards realising the only purpose of life, which is to realize the Atman. It is when the person is able to realise the presence of God not only in self but in everything around, this according to Gandhiji is the spiritual realization, the self-realization, which is the primary aim of life. Education is called to prepare the learner for this self-realization which is liberation (moksha). He emphasized the ancient Indian wisdom - *Sa vidya ya vimuktaya* (that which liberates knowledge) which should be the aim of education.

For this self-realization to be achieved which leads to liberation, Mahatma Gandhi laid down some rules for students. Morality and righteousness always have to be considered as an essential and undifferentiable part of education. He said that on one hand, students should gain education under the strict regimen of high morals, self-control and right thinking. On the other, they would also be expected to provide service to the society in general. According to Gandhiji, the purpose of education was not to teach a particular profession or occupation to the children, but to develop the 'full man/women' through teaching an occupation. This

includes their respect towards parent, teachers and elders and admiration of the young. It also includes following social traditions and constant cognizance of duties and responsibilities. Moral action, values and spiritualism were some of the critical features of Gandhiji's vision for the individual and society. This, for Gandhiji, comes through engagement with craft and working together in the community and for the community. It is through work that the learner learns self-discipline and values required for community living. This has been emphasized in the vision of the UGC and other statutory bodies that emphasize community engagements and internships. Like never before, there has been a growing consensus in need of these programs in University Education not only in India but around the globe. However, the challenge lies in enriching and equipping teachers and students to commit themselves to the philosophy and in the enacted and experienced curriculum space. One sees how Gandhian philosophy is seen in the understanding of learning through the lens of the constructivist and situated cognition view to learning. Rogoff (1995) identifies three interrelated perspectives on learning associated with three planes of analysis. The three planes are 'community,' 'interpersonal' and 'personal'; the view of the learning process associated with each of these is apprenticeship (where an individual participates in activities with others), guided participation (participation with others through observation and hands-on involvement) and participatory appropriation (refers to how individuals change through their involvement in or the other activity. It is about becoming rather than acquisition). This, too, is a testimony to how philosophical thoughts have guided different understandings and praxis.

For him, education was an instrument to bring equality in society, and he wanted every individual to be a part of this process. Rich or poor, every child deserved to be a part of this liberating process. As we go through the various writings of Gandhiji, we see that he constantly underscores the importance of education for the upliftment of the oppressed of the society, for the growth and development of the community as a whole, and thereby the building of the nation. This voice for 'Education for All' finally culminated in the Right to Education Act (2009).

How could this be attained? It could be attained only with a person of strong moral character who has experienced true education himself will be able to lead the students through the liberating experience called education. It will be attained

when a person who is aware of the teaching methodologies that support the emancipatory approaches to learning and teaching in higher education, as summarised in the diagram below. Therefore, the teacher should also be aware of different ways of leading the student through a liberating process and using student-centred approaches. Given below is the diagram of Entwistle, Noel (2007), who shows how the different approaches to teaching in higher education can lead a student to make movements in learning.

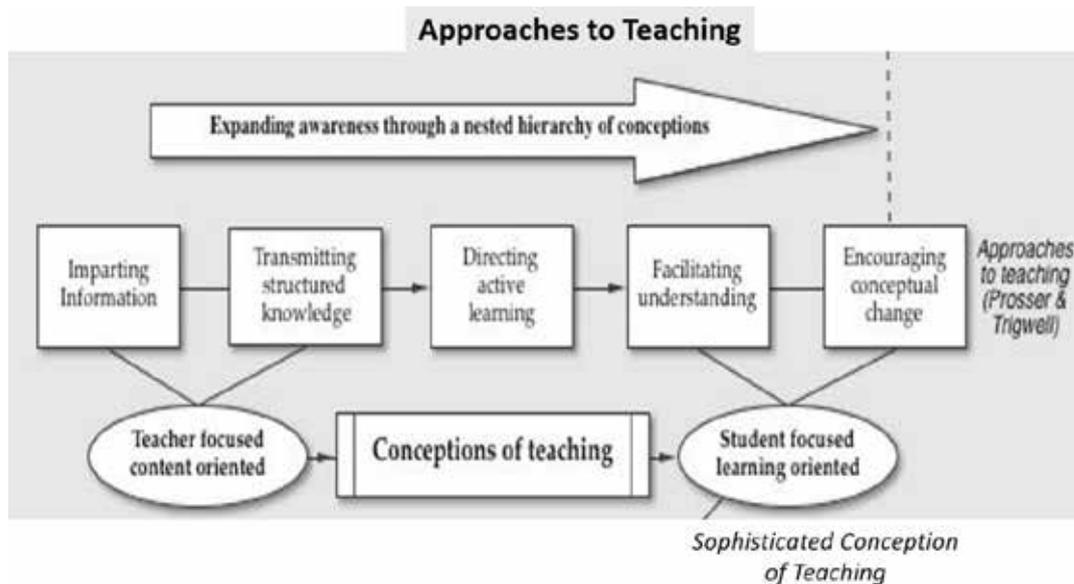


Fig. 4: Approaches to Teaching

During the present times of great uncertainty, conception of education as a process where a teacher is herself emancipated and leads her learners to liberation through education would help both teachers and learners find a direction to work towards and would help them to use education as a powerful enabler to tide over the times of crisis.

Conclusion

As the world leaders, as well as common men and women alike, are trying to make sense of ways in which the world is trying to rebuild itself from the grassroots after the unprecedented change that COVID 19 has brought on society, we would all agree that like never before, Gandhiji's vision of New Education based on values

of freedom, equality, justice and brotherhood is relevant and necessary. There is a loud cry for universities to create knowledge and train minds who would bring together material and human resources. The National Education Policy 2020 also reiterates the evolution of pedagogy towards education centred around experience, meaningful engagement and leading to gainful employment.

“While learning by rote can be beneficial in specific contexts, pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable” (NEP, 2020).

They too reiterate that the curriculum must include basic arts, crafts, humanities, games, sports and fitness, languages, literature, culture, and values. These subjects are in addition to science and mathematics, to ensure the all-round development of the learners as well as to ensure that the process of education is fulfilling to the learner.

Finally, the watchwords are Education for character building, education for developing the ethical, rational individuals, Education for compassion, and care, while catering to the need for equipping them with the knowledge and skills for employment are what we are called to strive for ourselves and the ones that we are entrusted with.

Reiterating the words of The UN General Secretary António Guterres that we need solidarity more than ever. We belong to each other. We stand together, or we fall apart. These times are similar in many ways to the times of reconstruction of society post-independence. Great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, who were inspired by 'education,' were willing to give all that it takes to help the nation realize that freedom, equality, justice, and brotherhood are possible ideals through education. They believed that adversity is the prosperity of the educated.

Through this exercise of going back and forth in time, we see how education has built on the vision of the great thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi and we need to be assured of the fact that, these ideals **are there – can be found and used** as a

beacon as we reconstruct society based on togetherness in the COVID and post COVID world.

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