

Gandhi's Educational Philosophy, the Wardha Scheme of Education, the Indian Constitution and NEP 2020

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Today I would like to speak on a theme that connects India's educational past with its constitutional vision and its contemporary educational policy: **Mahatma Gandhi's educational philosophy, the Wardha Scheme of Education, and their relevance to the Indian Constitution and the National Education Policy, or NEP, 2020.**

My central argument is simple: **Gandhi did not see education merely as the acquisition of information or preparation for examinations. He saw education as a means of developing the whole human being and, through that human being, transforming society.** Many elements of this vision—education for all, dignity of labour, learning through activity, moral and social development, mother-tongue education, vocational learning, and education connected with real life—continue to have relevance in India's constitutional and educational framework.

At the same time, we should not assume that NEP 2020 is simply a modern version of Gandhi's Wardha Scheme. It is a much broader policy responding to the needs of a technologically advanced, democratic and globally connected India. The interesting question, therefore, is: **What has survived from Gandhi's educational thought, and in what new forms does it appear today?**

1. Gandhi's Philosophy of Education

Let us begin with Gandhi himself.

For Gandhi, education was fundamentally concerned with the **development of the whole person**. It was not enough to develop the intellect while neglecting the body, character, emotions and moral life.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training NCERT's discussion of Gandhi's educational thought describes his objectives in terms of all-round development—physical, mental, social, moral and aesthetic—and emphasizes his idea of a school as a “doing and thinking school,” rather than merely a listening school.

This is an important distinction.

The conventional colonial model of education tended to privilege books, examinations, memorisation and academic credentials. Gandhi wanted education to be connected with **life and work**.

For him, the child should learn by doing.

A child should not simply read about agriculture; where appropriate, the child should understand agriculture through activity. The child should not merely read about cooperation, cleanliness, production or community life; these should become experiences through which the child learns.

Therefore, Gandhi's educational philosophy contains several closely connected principles.

First is **holistic development**—the development of body, mind and spirit.

Second is **learning through productive work or craft**.

Third is **self-reliance**. Education should enable an individual to develop the capacity to earn a livelihood and participate constructively in society.

Fourth is **dignity of labour**. Manual work should not be regarded as inferior to intellectual work.

Fifth is **moral and character education**. Education should produce responsible human beings, not merely successful examination candidates.

Sixth is **social responsibility**. The educated person should be connected with the community.

And seventh is **education in the mother tongue**. Gandhi believed that children should receive education through a language that is naturally accessible to them.

Thus, education, in Gandhi's conception, was not something separate from life. **Education had to take place through life and for life.**

This is why Gandhi's educational philosophy is often described through the term **Nai Talim**, or Basic Education.

2. The Wardha Scheme of Education

Now we come to the Wardha Scheme.

In 1937, Gandhi presented his ideas about Basic Education at the Wardha conference in Maharashtra. Gandhi sought to persuade the newly established provincial governments to adopt Basic Education as a national system. The subsequent work of Dr. Zakir Husain and others helped translate Gandhi's broad philosophy into a more systematic educational programme.

The Wardha approach is therefore important because it attempted to move Gandhi's educational philosophy from the level of ideas to the level of **curriculum and pedagogy**.

At its heart was the idea of **education through productive craft**.

Craft was not intended simply as vocational training. This point is crucial.

The purpose was not to produce a child who could perform a particular manual task and nothing more. Rather, craft was to become the **centre around which different areas of knowledge could be integrated**.

For example, agriculture could become a context for learning science, mathematics, environmental knowledge and social studies. Weaving or another productive activity could provide opportunities for mathematics, economics, design and language.

In other words, Gandhi wanted to overcome the artificial separation between **theory and practice, intellectual work and manual work, and school life and community life**.

The Wardha approach also gave importance to:

- education through the mother tongue;
- productive and socially useful work;
- self-reliance;
- cooperation;
- character formation;
- social service;
- learning connected with the child's environment;
- and the integration of intellectual and practical knowledge.

The Zakir Husain Committee subsequently developed the curriculum framework. NCERT records that the Wardha conference of 1937 was followed by the formulation of the Basic Education curriculum and teacher-training arrangements under Zakir Husain's leadership.

We should also remember that the Wardha Scheme was a product of its historical moment. It was designed in colonial India, where questions of poverty, unemployment, social inequality, colonial education and national reconstruction were particularly urgent.

Therefore, we should neither romanticise it nor dismiss it as an old-fashioned scheme.

Instead, we should ask: **What educational principles contained in it remain relevant?**

That question brings us to the Constitution.

3. Gandhi and the Indian Constitution

The Indian Constitution does not reproduce the Wardha Scheme as a constitutional educational programme. Nevertheless, there are significant points of connection between Gandhian educational thinking and the constitutional vision of education.

The Constitution treats education not merely as a private commodity but as an important instrument of **social justice, equality, citizenship and human development**.

One particularly important development was the insertion of **Article 21A**, which recognizes the right to education for children in the six-to-fourteen age group. The Constitution also contains Directive Principles concerning education and social welfare, while Articles 29 and 30 protect important cultural and educational rights.

The constitutional development eventually found concrete legislative expression in the **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009**, which provides for free and compulsory elementary education for children aged six to fourteen.

How does this connect with Gandhi?

The first connection is the idea that **education should be accessible to all**.

Gandhi's Basic Education was conceived as an education that could reach ordinary children, including children from poorer and socially disadvantaged communities. His emphasis on productive work also challenged the social hierarchy that placed manual labour below intellectual labour.

The second connection is **social equality**.

Gandhi believed that education should not reproduce social divisions. When children learn and work together, education can become a means of building cooperation and social responsibility.

The third connection is **dignity of labour**.

The Constitution does not establish Gandhi's craft-centred pedagogy, but the constitutional vision of a democratic and socially just society is difficult to separate from the recognition of the dignity of every form of socially useful work.

The fourth connection is **citizenship**.

For Gandhi, education was supposed to create responsible members of society. The constitutional order likewise requires citizens who understand rights, duties, equality, liberty, fraternity and democratic participation.

So, we can say that Gandhi's educational thought and constitutional education policy are not identical, but they share a broad concern with **human development, social justice, equality, citizenship and the democratization of education**.

4. From Gandhi to NEP 2020

Let us now move to the contemporary period.

The **National Education Policy 2020** represents a major restructuring of India's educational vision. It emphasizes holistic development, foundational learning, flexibility, multilingualism, vocational education, experiential learning, constitutional values and the integration of different forms of knowledge.

When we compare NEP 2020 with Gandhi, several striking parallels become visible.

First: Holistic Education

Gandhi wanted education to develop the whole human being.

NEP 2020 similarly speaks of **holistic development**. It seeks to move beyond a narrow understanding of education based only on academic achievement. The policy includes physical education, arts, crafts, vocational skills, ethical reasoning, communication, creativity, collaboration and other capacities alongside conventional academic subjects.

This is very close to the spirit of Gandhi's insistence that education should develop more than the intellect.

Second: Learning by Doing

Gandhi's school was to be a **doing and thinking school**.

NEP 2020 places considerable emphasis on experiential, activity-based and competency-based learning. It also seeks to reduce rigid boundaries between curricular and co-curricular activities and between academic and vocational learning.

Here we see a clear philosophical continuity.

The child is not merely a passive receiver of information. The child should explore, experiment, create, solve problems and apply knowledge.

Third: Vocational Education and Skills

This may be one of the most visible connections.

Gandhi wanted productive work and craft to occupy an important place in education. He believed that education should contribute to self-reliance and should remove the artificial hierarchy between mental and manual labour.

NEP 2020 gives vocational education a much more explicit place in the school system. It calls for vocational exposure and skills and seeks to remove the rigid separation between vocational and academic streams.

This does not mean that NEP 2020 simply repeats Gandhi. Modern vocational education also responds to the requirements of technology, industry, entrepreneurship and a changing labour market.

But the underlying idea—that **education should connect knowledge with useful skills and the world of work**—has a recognizable Gandhian resonance.

Fourth: Mother Tongue and Indian Languages

Language was central to Gandhi's educational thinking.

He argued for education through languages accessible to Indian children rather than making foreign-language education the foundation of learning.

NEP 2020 states that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8 and beyond, should be the home language, mother tongue, local language or regional language. It also emphasizes multilingualism and bilingual learning materials.

This is one of the clearest areas where a Gandhian concern has found contemporary policy expression.

At the same time, NEP 2020 recognizes India's multilingual reality and does not reduce education to one language. It seeks to combine Indian-language learning with multilingual competence.

Fifth: Education and the Community

Gandhi did not imagine the school as an isolated institution.

The school should be connected with its surrounding community, its productive activities and its social environment.

NEP 2020 likewise emphasizes learning connected with real life, local contexts and community participation. The Ministry of Education also highlights experiential learning, vocational exposure and the role of local communities in educational development.

Again, the language is different, and the context is different, but there is a common principle: **education becomes meaningful when it connects the learner with the world outside the classroom.**

5. Constitutional Values in NEP 2020

There is another important connection.

Gandhi believed that education must develop character and social responsibility. NEP 2020 explicitly links education with **constitutional values, fundamental duties, citizenship, human rights, gender sensitivity, environmental awareness and social responsibility.**

The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage, developed in the context of NEP 2020, similarly emphasizes constitutional values, responsible citizenship, compassion, empathy, scientific temper, creativity and commitment to an equitable and inclusive society.

This is important because education in a democracy cannot be reduced to producing employable individuals.

A democratic society also needs citizens who can live with difference, respect others, participate responsibly and understand their rights and duties.

Here again, there is an important point of contact with Gandhi's idea that education should produce **responsible human beings and responsible members of society.**

6. But We Should Not Equate Gandhi with NEP 2020

At this stage, I would like to make an important qualification.

It would be historically inaccurate to say that NEP 2020 is simply Gandhi's Wardha Scheme in a new form.

The differences are substantial.

Gandhi's educational programme emerged in the context of colonial India and was deeply connected with village life, self-sufficiency, handicrafts, ethical development and national reconstruction.

NEP 2020 is designed for a very different India—an India of digital technology, artificial intelligence, global economic integration, mass higher education, scientific research, entrepreneurship and rapidly changing employment patterns.

NEP therefore includes areas that could not have been part of Gandhi's original scheme: digital literacy, coding, computational thinking, artificial intelligence and other contemporary competencies.

Similarly, NEP 2020 gives students considerable flexibility in choosing subjects and seeks to break down traditional divisions between the sciences, humanities, arts and vocational education.

So, the relationship is better understood as **continuity of principles rather than identity of programmes**.

7. The Contemporary Relevance of Gandhi

What, then, can Gandhi contribute to our thinking about education today?

I would suggest at least five lessons.

First, **education should be holistic**. We should not measure the success of education only through examination scores.

Second, **learning should be connected with experience**. Students should have opportunities to make, create, investigate, collaborate and solve real problems.

Third, **work should have dignity**. Education should not teach children that some forms of work are respectable while others are inferior.

Fourth, **language matters**. Children learn deeply when education begins from linguistic and cultural contexts that they understand.

And fifth, **education has a social purpose**. The ultimate question is not simply, "How much does the student know?" It is also, "What kind of person and citizen is the student becoming?"

These questions are highly relevant in the twenty-first century.

We live in a period in which students can obtain enormous amounts of information from the internet and increasingly from artificial intelligence. Therefore, the value of education cannot lie simply in transferring information.

Education must help students develop **judgment, creativity, empathy, ethical reasoning, practical competence and the ability to work with others**.

In this respect, Gandhi's educational philosophy remains intellectually significant.

Conclusion

Let me conclude.

Gandhi's educational philosophy was an attempt to redefine the very meaning of education.

For him, education was not merely preparation for examinations or employment. It was a process of developing the **body, mind and character**, of connecting knowledge with

productive work, of developing self-reliance, of respecting labour, of strengthening community life and of creating responsible citizens.

The Wardha Scheme attempted to translate these principles into an educational programme centred on productive work, craft, the mother tongue, social responsibility and integrated learning.

The Indian Constitution subsequently established a broader democratic framework in which education became closely connected with equality, social justice, cultural rights and, through Article 21A, a fundamental right to education for children aged six to fourteen.

And NEP 2020, while belonging to a very different historical context, brings several related principles into contemporary education: holistic development, experiential learning, vocational exposure, multilingualism, flexibility, constitutional values and the integration of academic and practical learning.

Therefore, the continuing relevance of Gandhi does not lie in mechanically reproducing the Wardha Scheme.

It lies in asking the questions Gandhi asked:

What is education for?

What kind of human being should education produce?

How can knowledge be connected with life?

How can education reduce social divisions rather than reproduce them?

And perhaps the most important question:

Can education develop not only skilled individuals, but also responsible, ethical and socially conscious citizens?

If these questions remain central to our educational thinking, then Gandhi's educational philosophy is not merely a chapter in the history of Indian education. It remains part of an ongoing conversation about what education in a democratic India ought to mean.

Thank you.