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**Revisiting Gandhi:
What does the life of Gandhi mean for the world today, for higher
education, and Knowledge Democracy?**



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¹ Image Source: <http://www.kamat.com/mmgandhi/leader.htm>

1. INTRODUCTION

This year is marking the Sesquicentennial birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi is known in different circles for his different statures. He was a leader, a preacher, a practitioner but most importantly an educator. Gandhi throughout his life has written, spoken and emphasised extensively on the importance of education and learning. On this 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi, we will introspect on what Gandhi means for the world today, with a special emphasis on Higher Education and Knowledge Democracy.

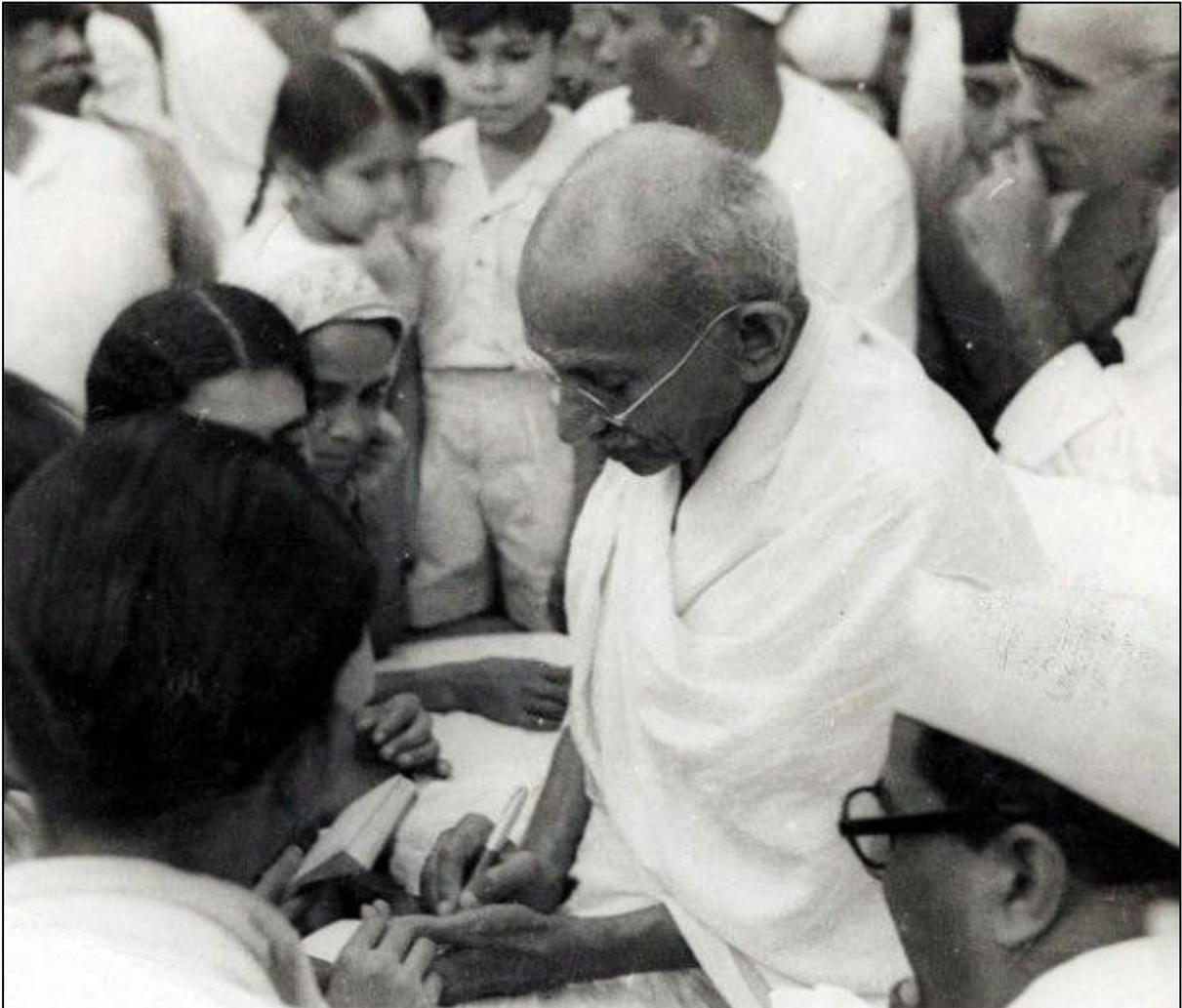
Gandhi is world renowned for devising a new educational programme called *Nai Talim*, which implies new education under which education has become life centred, instead of textbook centred. Nai Talim has been defined as *education for life, through life and throughout life*. Nai Talim has been divided into pre-basic, basic, post-basic, university and social education. Pre-basic is the nursery school part, basic is elementary education for a period of eight years, between 7 and 15 years of age. Post-basic is High school education and social education has become adult education (Dr. Veerabhadra Alladi, 2016) . Gandhi's Nayi Talim is in-depth pattern of education and is a complex arena of analysis. Regarding its relationship with higher education in particular, Nayi Talim proposes of a synthesis between vocation and education. This emphasises equally on the necessity of both vocational and literary training; as both of them will organically feed into one another. Vocational training will promote labour and will provide useful and more interesting content to literary training².

Gandhi's Nayi Talim saw student movement as an important tool of social and political organization. He also believed that this new system of education will act as a tool of social revolution and will lead to a more emancipated class structure. Gandhi's concept of education was first suggested for children between the ages of 7 and 14 and was called basic education. This was later on extended to all the stages. Gandhi felt that it should include the education of everybody, at every stage of life; including the university stage. The Sarvodaya thinkers accepted the whole idea underlying the new educational concept of Gandhi, including its social and individual aims.

Mahatma Gandhi was also a popular propagator of Adult Education. Some of his thoughts on Adult Education also applied to University Education. For him, the university education should be a natural continuation to the secondary or the school education. He believed that the Higher Education adopted by India at the time of independence was a misfit in this logical sequence and added no value to the country. Rather, the Higher Education of the time further enslaved the students and pushed them into the vicious cycle of luring after jobs. He also commented on the possible frustration and unrest that this type of education resulted into. On the contrary, Gandhi believed that the purpose of Higher Education institutes should be to serve the people of the country and lead to their betterment.

² Hind Swaraj, 1908, ch. 18

In the coming sections, we will pick out some specific strands of Gandhi's thought which emphasises on the status of Higher Education in India and hold contemporary relevance.



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2. GANDHI AND CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION

Gandhi's worldviews and visions are a diminishing sight in the contemporary times. It is a misfortune that Gandhi is known to the world for his philosophies on primary and secondary education and not as much on Higher Education. Revisiting Gandhi's system of education is a reassertion of the fact that Gandhi was indeed a visionary of his time. He was confident about the abilities of Higher Education institutions in nurturing a battalion of matured, skilled and accommodating young individuals. These educated youth will not just have professional expertise of knowledge but will also be capable of necessary ground action. The University of Gandhi's dream was the building block of a self-reliant and self-sustainable nation which was proud of its local languages, cultures, technology and knowledge. Gandhi has also been consistently talking about the

³ Image Source: <https://www.indiatimes.com/lifestyle/self/10-lessons-from-mahatma-gandhi-that-will-help-you-lead-a-happier-life-228722.html>

legitimacy of community knowledge and its undeniable importance in educating the youth of India. A developing country like India is steeping rapidly towards more globalized and homogenous education systems which have paid no heed to the social responsibilities and duties of educational institutions. These Universities are existing in the social spaces but have not realized the need to work towards the betterment of society. Gandhi being an ardent believer of physical labour gave some useful suggestion of keeping vocational elements in mainstream higher education. It is evident by the nature of higher education in India that we are creating more workforces which are capable of working for others and not necessarily for themselves. There is an increasing dearth of skilled youth in the country and the idea of vocationalizing higher education is an urgent requirement of today's time.

A very crucial contemporary concept of Civic University (GUNI 2017, 2017) finds strong resonance with Gandhian worldview of Education. The mantle of Civic University urges pursuing public good by aligning the university interests with societal interests and working collaboratively with other educational institutes to ensure a collectivized impact. Gandhi promulgated similar traits for higher educational spaces and emphasized greatly on social utility and relevance of a University. Building upon this idea, let us know discuss some specific aspect of Gandhi's worldview which relates to the higher education of today's world.

- **Learning linked to real world**

For Gandhi, education was incomplete without the element of learning. For him, a man was made of three constituents, the body, mind and spirit. Of them, spirit is the most important and the permanent element, with the body and mind just aiding to it. Thus, education must divulge the qualities of spirit and must lead to a holistic development of the body, mind and spirit. For Gandhi, the knowledge which is being imparted through our education system can possibly only develop the mind but certainly not the spirit or the body. He was in fact sceptical of the wholesome development of the mind too because the current education system bombards the students with excessive information albeit not always useful information which would have direct applications in the everyday life and practices of the students. Gandhi said:

“My experience has proved to my satisfaction that literary training by itself adds not an inch to one's moral height and that character-building is independent of literary training. I am firmly of opinion that the Government schools have unmanned us, rendered us helpless and godless. They have filled us with discontent, and providing no remedy for the discontent, have made us despondent. They have made us what we were intended to become, clerks and interpreters”. (Gandhi, 1921)

The ordinary meaning of Education is the mere knowledge of letters. This knowledge of letters often undermines the ordinary knowledge of the world. Gandhi said:

“A peasant earns his bread honestly. He has ordinary knowledge of the world. He knows fairly well how he should behave towards his parents, his wife, his children and his fellow villagers. He understands and observes the rules of morality. But he cannot write his own name. What do you propose to do by giving him a knowledge of letters? Will you add an inch to his happiness? Do you wish to make him discontented with his cottage or his lot? And even if you want to do that, he will not need such an education”. (Gandhi, 1910)

From the very beginning, Gandhi’s politics of education opposed staunchly against the lure of inculcating Western thought into the traditional systems. For higher education in particular, Gandhi emphasised that the subjects which are being taught at the level of universities have barely any relevance or bearing on realities around us. The higher education which is being taught in Indian Universities, keeps the students away from their sense of duty, Gandhi commented. He did not entirely discard the knowledge of letters but cautioned the masses to not make a fetish out of it. This knowledge is valuable only when it is of use to the masses and helps them in bringing their senses in subjugation and setting a firm foundation for ethics.

Another interesting and relevant aspect of Gandhi’s idea of education was the insistence of training all the bodily organs likewise. Apart from the development of mental faculties, Gandhi was a strong believer of imparting physical training, now known as vocational education, to the learners. To attain an indivisible whole, it is imperative to educate the body, mind and the spirit alike. For Gandhi, a training of skills was important because it makes a student self-reliant and capable of leading her/his own life in an autonomous fashion. An education which is clubbed with skills training is more self-sustainable, and long lasting. The time Gandhi was speaking for insisted on teaching the skills like handicraft, agriculture, cattle rearing etc. to the students which will aid the sustenance of a rural lifestyle suiting of the requirement of the time for which he was speaking. These propositions might appear obsolete on the outset but on a deeper introspection it is realized that with the onset of increasingly volatile economies, dynamic digital technologies, rapid change of social spaces and social relations; it is worth to embed the useful training of skills like digital into the mainstream educational pedagogies.

- **Local languages in Higher Education**

Gandhi actively engaged in the Politics of Knowledge. He exhibited contending ways of seeing, understanding and changing the world. Gandhi’s life and principles have resonated time and again about local knowledge and local wisdom. Economic development, for Gandhi, is not merely an increase in per capita income, but a structural transformation in the economy consistent with the principles of locality (swadeshi), social justice (sarvodaya), and small-scale industry (gramudyog). In Gandhi’s writings and work we find a unique effort to utilize mass politics in order to effect such a civilizational change through the construction of a lokavidya- based economy. (Basole, 2014)

Any conversation about Knowledge Democracy and Gandhi will be incomplete without the mentions of mother tongue and vernaculars. Mahatma Gandhi for the longest time had been a strong propagator of vernacular means of Education. In India, in particular, English is the language of education primarily because of its commercial and political value. Gandhi spoke in a time when English was starting to grow up as a language of dominance. Students wanted to learn English to brighten their prospects of jobs, marriages, services etc. It is not a great surprise that this classic language hangover has still continued in the higher education spaces even today. This language of dominance has enslaved and degraded the indigenous so much so that local languages are losing its credibility amongst the young people of today. Gandhi cautioned the country against this trend and urged for popularization of not just mother tongue scholarship but also of vernacular thoughts and actions. In one of the excerpts of the *Young India* magazine, Gandhi writes:

“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other peoples' houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave. I refuse to put the unnecessary strain of learning English upon my sisters for the sake of false pride or questionable social advantage. I would have our young men and young women with literary tastes to learn as much English and other world languages as they like, and then expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India and to the world, like a Bose, a Roy or the Poet himself. But I would not have a single Indian to forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother tongue, or to feel that he or she cannot think or express the best thoughts in his or her own vernacular.”⁴

In the contemporary times, for Higher education and vernaculars; Gandhi's visions hold great importance. The need for young people to learn, think, read and write in their own vernaculars has never been more felt. With the increasing homogenization of cultures, lifestyles and thoughts; Gandhi was ahead of his time in pointing out the urgency to revive the languages which belongs to the masses and which defines them. He said that the future is going to suffer an immeasurable loss in mastering a foreign language and discarding one's mother tongue and literature. Gandhi commented:

“There never was a greater superstition than that a particular language can be incapable of expansion or expressing abstruse or scientific ideas. A language is an exact reflection of the character and growth of its speakers. Among the many evils of foreign rule this blighting imposition of a foreign medium upon the youth of the country will be counted by history as one of the greatest. It has sapped the energy of the nation, it has shortened the lives of the pupils, it has estranged them from the masses, it has made education unnecessarily expensive. If this process is still persisted in, it bids fair to rob the nation of its soul. The sooner

⁴ Young India, 1-6-1921

therefore educated India shakes itself free from the hypnotic spell of the foreign medium, the better it would be for them and the people.”⁵

The situation is so stark there it won't be an exaggeration to say that majority of Indian universities has English as their medium of instructions. There lacks clear data on the status of language of instruction in India universities but there exists some useful references supporting the language crisis in Indian universities. This is particularly troubling because a vast majority of population in the country still doesn't understand English comfortably and a curriculum and pedagogy which is delivered in a foreign language like this makes the students disillusioned and anxious⁶. Additionally, the youth of a nation cannot keep or establish a meaningful contact with the masses unless their knowledge is not communicated through a medium understood by the people. It's a crisis that lacs of young people are struggling to master a foreign language which will have rare bearings in their day to day lives and struggles, and all of this at the cost of losing one's own vernacular and mother tongue!

- **Higher Education and Service to Society**

Gandhi's ideal accords to the 'bread and butter' scheme wherein the education should aim to put to use to acquire basic necessities of life. He envisioned a life devoid of materialism and believed firmly in a self-supporting life and systems which aids the economic as well personal development of individuals. He felt that Education is the foundation of character building in a student which encompasses altruism and a life devoid of materialism. This Education is ingrained in the concept of service to others, including community service and service to the needy and deprived sections.

In more contemporary sense, several theorists and practitioners have been urging to promote deeper interactions between higher educational institutions and local communities to identify and solve real life problems and therefore nurture a spirit of mutual benefit (GUNI 2017, 2017). A number of contemporary initiatives in Higher Education also promote facilitating partnerships between local communities and institutions of higher education so that students and teachers can learn from local knowledge and wisdom. 7

Returning to Gandhi, his ideas of service were interchangeable with his ideas of nation-building. These ideas, even though visible have been ghettoized and narrowly understood in the higher education spaces today. The concept of service and national building has now become a prerogative of a designated department with no mention of the overall social responsibility of higher education institutions.

For Gandhi, true education should also focus on social welfare. Gandhi was speaking in a time when the country was primarily rural and he categorically emphasized on youth to serve villages in attaining an upliftment of one and all. Social services, he said was an

⁵ Young India, 5-7-1928.

⁶ <https://medium.com/@prachurgoel/higher-education-in-indian-languages-7fc44204cf8c>

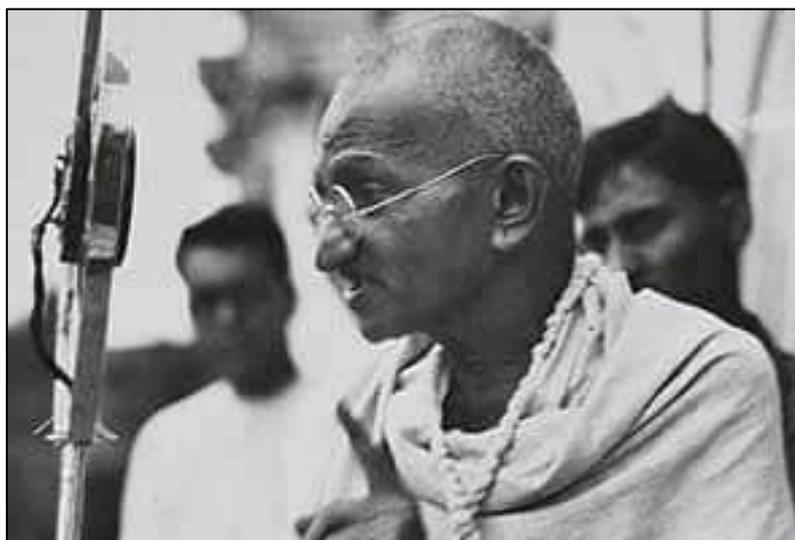
⁷ http://unescochair-cbrsr.org/pdf/resource/Knowledge%20&%20Engagement_26-09-16_pdf%20ver-mail.pdf

inherent component of education. Gandhi was also in favour of the young people teaching the local people the importance of hygiene and health; this in itself is a key ingredient of social service that includes his holistic perspective of the well-being. Gandhi viewed social service as an inherent part of education. Some of his words deserve to be quoted in this context:

‘The end of all education should surely be service, and if a student gets an opportunity of rendering service even whilst he is studying, he should consider it as a rare opportunity and treat it not really as a suspension of his education but rather its complement’⁸.

The idea of a service orientation of education took ethics, morality and spiritualism as its important elements. He laid out some regulations for the students to be more righteous and moral. He bestowed great responsibilities on the students to indulge in right thinking, practice self-control, serve the society, respect others and ensure constant awareness of one’s duties and responsibilities. He however, never explicitly mentioned the roles of universities in promoting social transformation and service amongst the communities and the deprived sections of the society.

Another important aspect which Gandhi talked about was the importance of students’ organization. He thought the student organization as a powerful instrument of service. He was not very appreciative of agitations by student organizations and suggested that these organizations should have a more socially driven mandate. One important purpose of the organization should be to discover the defects of the current education and seek to remove them, including a correction of their own conduct. Eventually, by their corrected conduct, the students will be able to influence the views of the administration of the institutions. Gandhi warned the students against the ills of party politics.⁹



⁸ *Young India*, 13-10-1927

⁹ *Harijan*, 7-9-1947.

3. CONCLUSION

Gandhi lived and preached in a time when India was in a highly transformative stage. The economy was crumbling; the masses were uneducated and poor, the political and social instability was at an extreme high. Gandhi's idea of education was complementary to his visions of nation building. Till his last breath, Gandhi was hopeful that education is going to change the future of the nation and create a bandwagon of dedicated, skilled and abled young people who will change the face of India and make it a self-sustained and prosperous country. Gandhi was always a critical commenter against the kind of Higher Education that was being given in the country. He was confident that if his ideas of Higher Education are brought into application, it will lead to more useful education, more and better libraries, laboratories and much better research institutes. He opined that there should be more experts and skilled professionals in these disciplines who will respond to the growing national requirements of health, research, and technology and feed into the local economies by responding to the rights and wants of the people. These experts, he said should speak local languages, the languages of the people. The knowledge gained by them should be a common property of the people and should be available to all. The cost of this education and its output are to be evenly and justly distributed¹⁰.

India has now been an independent nation for more than seven decades now. The economy is flourishing; there are commendable scientific advances, rural societies are slowly transforming into urban spaces, and population of young people is on a constant rise. It might appear that Gandhi's beliefs are becoming outmoded for the current context. On the contrary, Gandhi has never been more relevant as he is today. In times where the country is in the dearth of skilled youth, where skills and education are viewed as separate entities, where societies and communities have no explicit relationship with higher education spaces and where the meanings of service and duties are losing its public legitimacy; Gandhi, his life and his ideals have become the need of the time. A number of government policies like Right to Education Act, Skills India Mission, Unnat Bharat Abhiyan etc. exhibit fragments of Gandhian imagination of education. The present Indian context of higher education is in dire need of many more such initiatives which revive the social relevance of higher education and bring education and learning closer to the lives and struggles of the masses of the country. Another important lesson to draw from Gandhian worldview is to revive and respect community based learning systems in university spaces. Spaces of higher education are diverse and represent multiple interest group and societies. It is rather hegemonic to have a rigid pedagogical scheme which does not serve all these interest equally. In order to incorporate the learnings from different communities and their life struggles the higher education spaces will have to take a more flexible and inclusive approach to higher education. This will not just provide more legitimacy and importance to the native knowledge of people

¹⁰ Harijan, 9-7-38

but will also instil confidence, peace and contentment amongst the young people who find it very difficult to adapt to foreign languages and cultures as propagated in the Universities. This will help in preparing next generation of more confident and grounded professionals and prepare them with knowledge and competencies for effective economic and social life as an adult.

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