
Gandhian Way of Education: M.K. Gandhi's Educational Philosophy in R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*

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Abstract

M.K. Gandhi is a unique paradox. He has been sanctified and idolised for his beliefs and teachings and at the same time has been assumed as an impractical idealist. On the contrary his educational philosophy has been highly practical and in the ever-changing times and challenges of the 21st century, it becomes pertinent to explore it. Education is the facilitator of humanity. It is precisely this understanding of education that Gandhi propounds in his philosophical understanding of the same. The roots of all evils lie in ignorance of education and the roots of all virtuousness lies in adherence to it. R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) and M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948) were two major figures of the 20th century India, owing to the former's literary and the latter's political and philosophical sensibilities. Gandhi's ideas and ideals regarding education are multi-faceted. For him education has multiple aims and objectives. For him education is not only a means to serve an individual or a national cause but goes on to serve the still larger cause of humanity. It is this aspect of his teachings which will remain the focal point of this paper. The novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) is written in the characteristic Narayanian vein which refuses to evolve and incorporate serious issues on the surface. Though primarily it appears to be apolitical and plain in style, the novel nonetheless exhibits some serious issues related to education. Efforts would be made in the paper to show how the educational system portrayed in the novel is in stark contrast to the educational philosophy and the ideals for which Gandhi pined throughout his life. The paper would hence attempt to delineate the Gandhian educational philosophy by placing it in and around the critique of education that R.K. Narayan offers in his debut novel *Swami and Friends* (1935).

Keywords- Education, Gandhism, Wardha Scheme, Basic Education, Nai Talim

Introduction

“Narayan, with his glories and limitations, is the Gandhi of modern Indian literature.”

—V.S. Naipaul, ‘The Master of Small Things’ (2001)

Swami and Friends (1935) was written at a time when the Gandhian influence had taken the nation by a storm. Hence, it would be pertinent to analyse the text in terms of a Gandhian understanding of the same. M.K. Naik, in his seminal work, *A History of Indian English Literature*, gives different categories in which to situate Indian English literature. They are – ‘The Pagoda Tree: From the Beginning to 1857’; ‘The Winds of Change: 1857-1920’; ‘The Gandhian Whirlwind: 1920-1947’; and lastly, ‘The Ashoka Pillar: Independence and After’. RK Narayan’s debut novel *Swami and Friends* (1935) falls right in the middle of the “Gandhian Whirlwind” (Naik 120) that gave us the most popular and enigmatic political and philosophical leader of the 20th century. Though not overtly political in tone and nature, *Swami and Friends* is a novel which has deep undertones of nationalistic consciousness. To say that Narayan was unaffected by politics, political ideology and by Gandhi would be incorrect.

Gandhi was a staunch advocate of education and it’s enriching effect on the student, not just mentally but also physically: “By education I mean all round drawing out of the best in child and man-body, mind and spirit.” (*Harijan*, July 31, 1937) And in prescribing such a universal and inclusive definition of education, Gandhi is fulfilling twin objectives. On the one hand he seems to vie for a system that has education as one of its founding principles. On the other hand his idea of the nation also finds an expression in these same methods of education that he prescribes. Hence, to read *Swami and Friends* as a critique of the education system will also necessarily entail a reading of Gandhi’s educational philosophy and his ideals through these twin objectives that he has set out for himself.

Gandhi was perhaps the only man in India who was most closely associated with the masses at the grass-root levels. He understood that a holistic approach towards education is needed to gain freedom and have a liberating effect on the people. Naren Tambe succinctly captures the Gandhian efforts to bolster the national cause through Gandhi’s philosophy of education:

There was, indeed, political consciousness among the Indian people. But it had to be properly channelled. Gandhi turned to education. He knew that the political freedom

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would be jeopardized if the Indian people were not first trained and prepared educationally, morally, and socially. (Tambe 95)

And hence, Gandhi took upon himself the responsibility to frame a system of education which can prepare them for the national cause, namely, freedom. This gave rise to his famous concept of Basic Education, also known as the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education, 1937. This was also known as 'Nai Talim' (New Education). Comparing Gandhi, the political thinker with Gandhi, the educational thinker, B.D. Bhatia holds “that one of the most valuable legacies that he has left to posterity is his educational teachings crystalized in the Basic Scheme of Education.” (Bhatia 120)

In the ‘Basic Scheme’ Gandhi puts great stress on an education which has its emphasis laid on manual productive work such as hand-crafts. It was a highly practical method which ensured that children should be provided with education that can help them to build a strong base required to earn a respective livelihood. Gandhi’s ideas in the ‘Wardha Scheme’ is not the sole philosophy that he represents. Gandhi, in his *Autobiography*, in his journals, newspapers and other books has delineated his educational ideas in unequivocal terms. It is quite apparent from his earlier writings too that Gandhi was a man who would pronounce a very holistic idea regarding education. Surayu Prasad Chaube very briefly remarks: “While discussing his philosophy of life we have seen that he wants to establish a spiritual society on the basis of truth, non-violence and justice. So, he has evolved a philosophy of education as a dynamic side of this philosophy of life.” (Chaube 142) Reading the Gandhian philosophy of education one notices the sheer presence of life in it. And as J.C. Aggarwal quotes Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s personal secretary: “The idea of self-supporting education cannot be divorced from the ideological background of non-violence, and unless we bear in mind that the new scheme is intended to bring into being a new age and from which communal hatred is eliminated and exploitation is eschewed, we cannot make a success of it” (Aggarwal 337), it becomes clear that Gandhi’s educational philosophy is not only aimed at self-support and sustenance. There is a larger purpose to his teachings which goes well beyond the classroom. Gandhi’s educational ideals can thus be seen within a larger framework of the national cause. And since the times in which Gandhi was living was marred with communal hatred, his ideas for an educated nation promised to eliminate communalism.

Swami and Friends is at one level a critique of the existing educational structure under the colonial Raj. John Thieme presents us with an interesting insight into the novelistic approach that the novelist uses. Thieme says that “Far from being politically innocent,” the novel offers “a subversive response to the colonial ethic and to the educational curriculum that was one of its lynch-pins” (Thieme 180). Hence, it is clear that Narayan, under the garb of the apolitical is vehemently criticizing the educational structure of the times. The novel begins with the author describing the childhood wishes and desires of school going children. Swami is more interested in playing and roaming around, which are the only delectable things that any young child will want to do. But the larger point remains that the very thought of ‘school’ exhibits a distaste in Swami. This allows Narayan to adequately satirise and criticise the existing educational system. The beginning lines of the novel reads: “He shuddered at the very thought of school: that dismal yellow building; the fire-eyed Vedanayagam, his class-teacher; and the headmaster with his thin long cane....” (SF 1) These lines, shows the grave and poor state of the colonial education system.

The children are afraid of their school, teachers and examinations. And the fact that studying is their biggest fear shows that the education system is totally reading-oriented and gives excessive focus on quantity rather than quality. This is a passive state of education. Gandhi on the other hand called for an active state. Looking at the curriculum and the homework that is provided to the students at the school, the readers would notice the obsolescence in the methods of education. The students get “five puzzles in profit and loss”, copying down “a page from his Eight Lesson” and writing “dictionary meanings of difficult words.” (SF 2) It would be clear to the readers that the curriculum prescribed to the students is doing very little to engage their critical faculties. What is being promoted here is Rote Learning, a form of learning which lays force on repetition. But this type of learning has very little role to play in developing the critical faculties in them. Gandhi would have been perhaps the first one to point out to the out-datedness of this method of teaching.

In the novel *Ebenezar*, the teacher who insulted Lord Krishna and exalted Lord Jesus, points out at how the British, with its ‘civilising mission’ is out there to demean the gods, religion and culture of India. Gandhi was against this foreign and un-Indian education that was being imparted to the pupils during the colonial Raj. He propounded an indigenized form of education. Hence, his educational philosophy is not only aimed at a more humane and

inclusive development of students, but is also aimed against the colonial Raj. By propounding an alternate form of education, far removed from the kind that was imposed on Indian society, Gandhi is in fact attempting to thwart the colonial bid to brainwash Indians into sycophancy and servitude.

In the Albert Mission School, the students are given corporal punishment for lack of compliance to school discipline. Finding the corporal punishments inhuman, Gandhi writes in *Indian Opinion*: “The primary function of teachers is, therefore, not to teach the alphabet, but to inculcate humanity.” (*Indian Opinion* May 18, 1907) Moreover there are several instances interspersed in the novel which shows the bad state of education in Malgudi. Student beatings, unnecessary focus on topics and subjects far removed from the actual needs of a student, excessive deliberation on rote learning are some of the facts which further hamper a sound and critical growth of all the children in the novel. J. Krishnamurthi, one of the most renowned teachers and educationists in modern India echoes the Gandhian thought when he says:

‘Educate’ in the real sense of that word; not to transmit from the teachers to the students some information about mathematics or history or geography, but in the very instruction of these subjects to bring about a change in your mind. Which means that you have to be extraordinarily critical. (Krishnamurthi pp. 5-6)

But what we see at the schools in Malgudi is exactly the opposite. None of the schools seem to engender any critical faculty in the students. The novelist has shown the disinterest of the students in their classroom to express the fact that they are not in a happy learning environment. Focus is given to learn names of the rivers of Africa and Europe: “Nile was the most important river in Africa, the boy answered promptly, and the teacher was satisfied.” (SF 17) The children are made to draw maps of Europe and Africa. What is important to note here is the fact that there is a conspicuous absence of the indigenous in the curriculum prescribed for the students. It is apparent that the kind of education that was being provided in the Albert Mission School was inclined towards an alien culture. This also points towards the colonial enterprise and the colonial bid to alienate the children from their own nativity.

When one looks at the postulates of the Wardha Scheme of 1937, it becomes all the more apparent that Gandhi’s ideologies were pitted against this imperial regime. There is a conscious anti-imperialistic strategy at work in this particular juncture which in the words of

Steele & Taylor “anathematized, rhetorically at least, ‘western’ educational aims.” (Steele & Taylor 35) Steele and Taylor hold the same stream of thought when they say: “because of Gandhi's coherent and in some respects extreme anti-colonialism, his educational philosophy is a part of a general ideological position which was fundamentally opposed to the culture, structures and practices of British colonial rule.” (Steele & Taylor 33) Hence any attempt to encapsulate Gandhi’s ideologies with respect to education needs to be also looked at from the larger anti-imperial and anti-colonial Gandhian perspective.

Of all the students the one who is at the satiric end of Narayan is Sankar, “the most brilliant boy of the class.” (SF 7) He is a consistent topper who has mastered the art of rote learning. Narayan depicts him thus: “He knew all the rivers, mountains, and countries in the world. He could repeat history in his sleep. Grammar was child’s play to him.” (SF 8) Such a description of a student might be a teacher’s delight but will be the scorn of educationists like Gandhi. Narayan’s portrayal seems to be deficient of a human touch and rather borders on a mechanical depiction of the same. A parallel to this can be drawn from Charles Dicken’s *Hard Times*, which was also a novel written to depict the poor education system of industrial England. Bitzer, the victim of the poor educational philosophy is deplete of any human touch in the novel. Narayan is not as sharply satirical of Bitzer’s Indian counterpart but is nonetheless showing the misinformed and misplaced state of education prevalent in British India. Parents, teachers, the school administration, the establishment and the British Raj are all at the receiving end of the satire of Narayan. Swami’s father is too harsh at times regarding Swami’s education. In the novel we are able to see how Swami is consistently and constantly coerced into studying for long hours. On the contrary this does not guarantee Swami’s attention and focus towards his studies. Rather it makes him nervous and anxious about his education. Swami runs away from his home towards the end of the novel as he has left his school. His father has failed in becoming a role model for Swami owing to his excessive call for discipline and incessant stress on studies. Such an atmosphere seems to stifle Swami and he finds no other way but to quit his school and his home. Extreme focus on studies disgruntles him and he escapes home. It is not only the result of the parents’ negligence but also school education that fails to incorporate active, student friendly and engaging modes of imparting knowledge.

Gandhi does not only hold the teacher and the pupil as accountable to the system of education. For him the education system goes well beyond the pupil-teacher matrix to encompass the larger domestic and social spheres. And that is why Gandhi says that “parents should provide for excellent education, teachers should discharge their responsibility and pupils should recognize that mere literacy is not education” (*Indian Opinion* May, 18 1907) Gandhi understands that not only the school but the parents of a child also play a very significant role in shaping and nurturing a child’s mental and psychological bearings. He says in his *Autobiography*: “The education that children naturally imbibe in a well-ordered household is impossible to obtain in hostels. I therefore kept my children with me.” (Gandhi p.238) Gandhi understands his own parental responsibility towards his children and hence advocates the same. The situation in Swami’s household is such that his father’s overbearing and strict attitude distances Swami from him. Chapter nine – ‘School Breaks Up’ shows how examinations take a toll on the students. “This was a trying period in Swami’s life” (SF 57), says the narrator. It is important to understand here that examinations are a pain for the students. This is because the education that the children are receiving is examination-oriented. Rather, what we need is an examination which is education-oriented and an education system which is need-oriented. Such a system which focuses on the practical needs of children is visibly absent from the novel. Gandhi has called against this sort of education by presenting a need based and practical alternative in his ‘Basic Education’ scheme.

In the same chapter Narayan talks about certain issues in the education system which are prevalent even today. The students discuss the length of the answers they have written. The focus is more on the quantity of words inscribed on the examination sheet rather than the quality of words. We also see how the students become serious with their studies only when the examination draws closer. This is a problem which is prevalent in Indian schools and universities even today. Last-minute studies are given more weightage today than a holistic and comprehensive educational system. What is more problematic in such an attitude is that ‘last-minute’ study is more focussed on gaining marks rather than knowledge. This is a fundamentally flawed attitude as reducing the idea of education into a mere scoring exercise primarily demeans the value of education. Thus, there is a need to overhaul the entire education system which comprises not just of the curriculum and the students, but also teachers, parents, governmental intervention and a host of other factors. Gandhi, through his

Wardha Scheme has taken into consideration all of them. One can easily see the critique of the education system of Malgudi in the examinations that Swami and his friends have to go through. During the examinations Narayan draws a colourless and lifeless picture of the school:

At school everybody seemed to be overwhelmed by the thought of the examination. It was weeks since anybody has seen a smile on Sankar's face. Somu had become brisk and business like. As per Rajam he comes to school at the stroke of the first bell and left at stroke of last bell hardly uttering a dozen words to anybody. (SF 58)

This is clearly a humorous but dismal picture that Narayan draws. But what is perhaps more dismal is the fact that this is a bitter truth that holds true even today. And one of the prime reasons for this dismal state is the over importance ascribed to the materialistic gains of education. Education in India is seen largely through the prism of materialistic gains. Gandhi's educational philosophy is important to imbibe because his ideas promise to provide all-round development to students. His concept of 'Basic Education' includes not just the 'Bread-and-Butter' aspect of education but also takes care for an overall mental and physical development of the students. And that is why in his *Autobiography* he says: "Today I know that physical training should have as much place in the curriculum as mental training." (Gandhi 21) Unless we shift the focus from a materialistic notion of it, we cannot make far strides into the right direction. And to do that we must look into education as conceived by Gandhi, who ascribes not only a humanistic but also a highly practical notion to it.

In chapter twelve – 'Broken Panes', we get a glimpse of the Gandhian phenomenon as the politics of the 1930's with its popular civil and political unrest is unfolded. Swami's lack of involvement in his own classroom is instrumental in channelizing him into the Gandhian movement of the 1930's. Because the kind of education provided to the students made little or no impact on them, Swami and his friends look for contentment in the political activities. Swami's participation in the unrest of the 1930's can be seen as his act of contentment after his disillusion with the education system. Moreover, his anger against the school headmaster and Ebenezer's abuses towards Hindu Gods are also some reasons for it. P.S. Sundaram, a prominent critic in 1973 writes: "the teacher and headmaster Ebenezer's denunciation of Krishna were not uncommon in Missionary Schools half a century ago." (Sundaram 28) Gandhi understands this degradation of the indigenous by the British and hence he deals with

it in his educational philosophy which called for indigenous education. Hence, it can adequately be said that Gandhi's educational philosophy was not only directed towards liberating the student's intellect, but also towards liberating Indian minds of slavery. Gandhi understood that children can be deeply affected by new ideas and attitudes. Understanding the significance of the atmosphere in which children grow, Gandhi says: "We hold that real education consists in the habits which one knowingly or unknowingly imbibes from the atmosphere, ones surroundings and the company one keeps and above all in work." (*Indian Opinion*, May 18, 1907) And his educational philosophy adequately handles this, as is evident in his idea of a craft-production centred education system. Writing in *Harijan*, Gandhi said:

Nai Talim covers the whole education of the individual from the time of conception to the moment of death...Instead of regarding craft industry as different from education, I will regard the former as the medium for the latter. Nai Talim, therefore, ought to be integrated into the scheme. (*Harijan* Nov 10, 1946)

The poor state of education, coupled with an unhappy atmosphere, further deteriorated by the humiliating beatings that Swami had to face in the school made him rebel and leave his first school. Swami re-joins Board High School. But things were not much better either. The amount of homework given at Board High School was much more than that given at Albert Mission: "Six sums in arithmetic, four pages of 'handwriting copy', dictionary meanings of scores of tough words, two maps, and five stanzas in Tamil poetry, were the average homework every day." (SF 144) There is virtually no focus on development of skills or calibre. It marks the presence of an obsolete and irrelevant curriculum, far removed from the actual needs of the students. In response to the 'handwriting copy' given to Swami, one can read Gandhi's ideas regarding good handwriting, which must be taught to the children rather than making them copy it. He says in his *Autobiography*: "I saw that bad handwriting should be regarded as a sign of an imperfect education... good handwriting is a necessary part of education." (Gandhi 22) This also goes in consistency with Gandhi's obsession with the 'hand' and the handicrafts, which he advocates in his Wardha Scheme of Education.

The headmaster of the other school is also equally sadistic in nature. He too believes that children can only be corrected with a 'cane'. And once again we see how Swami upon being beaten, in a fit of rage "plucked the cane from the headmaster's hand and flung it out of

the window.” (SF 171) Both the schools are equally degenerative in their treatment of children. Swami runs away from Board High School because of the same suffocating and humiliating atmosphere. The kind of education that the children at Malgudi receive is the kind of education which is more establishment and teacher-centric rather than student-centric. With the only possible exception of Mr. D. Pillai “who had earned a name in the school for kindness and good humour” (SF 3), all the other teachers in the school are incompetent to handle the pressures and responsibility of education. Narayan describes him gloriously:

He was reputed to have never frowned or sworn at the boys at any time. His methods of teaching history confined to no canon of education... When he described the various fights in history, one heard the clash of arms and the groans of the slain. He was the despair of the headmaster whenever the latter stole along the corridor. (SF 3)

What we witness in this case is an experiential form of learning given to the students by D. Pillai. This experiential learning remains surprisingly absent from today’s curriculum too. More and more focus is given on Rote Learning which does not prove beneficial in the long run. The absence of experiential learning is playing a huge role in downgrading the educational output in our nation even today.

‘Basic Education’ bordering on extra-curricular activities and experiential learning with an exclusive focus on crafts and productive works will break the inflexible nature of the curriculum. It will provide a free environment to the students to indulge themselves in something productive. Another Gandhian scholar Eugene Link shows how the Gandhian way of education, being work-centric, assists in furthering the national cause, namely democracy: “Work-centred education teaches democracy by actions, not words.” (Link 215) Over emphasis on theoretical and academic instructions tends to make the students mechanical. Hence, a “Work-centred education” as propounded by Gandhi will shift the focus of education from being 'examination-centric' to 'activity-centric'. The former is passive, while the latter remains active.

Gandhi had been one of the most sensational experimentalists that the world has ever seen. His ‘Basic Education’ has the force to uplift the downtrodden and the weak. Contrary to popular opinion his educational philosophy is quite relevant in the contemporary 21st century. And hence any efforts to call his educational philosophy as impractical and over-idealistic needs a proper reassessment. Moreover, there is an urgency to reevaluate, reassess and refine

his educational philosophy for the larger cause of the nation. It is high time we acknowledge the need of a new and an all-inclusive educational system. The ‘Gandhian Way of Education’ can be a great starting point.

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