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Basic Education

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

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INTRODUCTION

“By education I mean an all round drawing out of the best in child and man—body, mind, and spirit”, wrote Gandhiji in an article in *Harijan* in July 1937, and that was the beginning of one of the greatest revolutions in educational thinking in this country. He put forward tentative ideas which had the experience of decades of work with the masses behind them and could form the basis of a system of education in accordance with the needs of India's vast rural population. Behind the scheme of education Gandhiji envisaged was the belief, and one which has been accepted by all modern educational thought as psychologically sound, that true learning can come only through doing.

A small conference of social and educational workers, including Education Ministers from various provinces, was called at Wardha shortly after Gandhiji's articles on the subject appeared in *Harijan*. A committee, with Dr. Zakir Husain as chairman, was appointed to prepare a tentative scheme and syllabus. The report of the committee was published under the title “Basic National Education” and its main recommendations were that :

- i) free and compulsory education should be given to all children for a period of seven years;
- ii) the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue;
- iii) the process of education should be centred round some form of manual and productive work in the shape of a craft, and that
- iv) this education should be self-supporting to the extent of being able to pay for the salary of the teachers.

Shortly afterwards, an All-India Board, called the Hindustani Talimi Sangh, was formed “to work out in a consolidated manner a programme of Basic National Education”.

The Central Advisory Board of Education was quick to see

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the great merit of the Wardha Scheme and appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Sri B. G. Kher to examine its possibilities. Some of the existing misconceptions were cleared and it was emphasised that the scheme was one of education and not production. The main recommendations of the Kher Committee which accepted in toto the principle of education through activity were that:

- 1) the scheme of basic education should first be introduced in rural areas,
- 2) the age range of compulsion should be six to fourteen years, but children could be admitted even at the age of five,
- 3) the diversion of students from the basic school to other kinds of schools should be allowed after the fifth class, and
- 4) the medium of instruction should be the mother tongue.

Another committee was appointed under the same chairman to co-ordinate the basic system with higher education and the recommendations of both these committees were accepted by the Central Advisory Board of Education and incorporated in the report on Post-war Educational Development in India, published in 1944. This report was approved by the Government of India and the State Governments, and differed from the Wardha Scheme mainly in that it did not expect craft work in basic schools to pay for a substantial portion of the cost of basic education.

Apart from the fact that basic education is the most practical and least wasteful system of education for a poor country like India, it has the inherent merit of inculcating in the individual qualities which would enable him to exercise intelligently the rights and duties of citizenship. The idea of educating through craft and productive work, which is the backbone of the entire philosophy of basic education, supplies the greatest possible impetus to democratic self-government in schools, and offers an opportunity for the cultivation of civic and social virtues, provided the guidance of expert teachers is available. This, it was hoped, would not only help to bring into existence the new co-operative social order of which Gandhiji had dreamed in the past, but simultaneously produce citizens from whom that society would derive strength.

Work-centered education meant not the teaching of

vocational handicrafts side by side with liberal education, but imparting education through some selected handicraft which could find "natural points of correlation with important human activities and interests". In other words, it meant "the exploitation for educative purposes of the resources implicit in craft work". It involved the co-ordination of will, muscle and concentration, of hand and intellect, which is admittedly more desirable for the development of the total personality than education with an exclusively literary bias. Since the natural environment was to be the medium of education, as it should be in every good system of education, the scheme had promise of developing into a dynamic movement which would stabilise rather than alienate or impoverish the human material in the rural areas, make for all-round economy, and establish a cultural continuity with the past so that children brought up in this system could again become the true representatives of the culture and genius of our nation.

Whereas basic education has been accepted in principle almost universally, certain doubts, fears and misunderstandings continue to be expressed from time to time in regard to certain features of the system. An attempt is made here to answer some of the objections that have been raised rather than explain the educational philosophy, ideology and practical working of the scheme of basic education which have been discussed in many publications already.

***Q. 1—By introducing the child to a craft at too early an age, does not the system of basic education deny him the carefree childhood which is necessary for the unobstructed development of his natural faculties?**

Such a fear presupposes that the craft would be taught in a mechanical way with the primary object of providing the child with a narrow vocational training and without regard to his total development. It is groundless as such, for the technique of basic education aims at doing away with the dualism between labour and leisure, and to a large extent between work and play. The emphasis is not on the craft itself but on the avenues it opens up for the child's natural curiosity and the outlet it provides for practical activity. Basic education merely takes advantage of this curiosity to correlate that craft with relevant subjects and

thus teach the child in a manner which does not burden his mind in any way.

In a good basic school, the child is never conscious that he is learning a craft. To him the craft is just a kind of activity. The fact that the child's energy is directed into productive channels does not necessarily mean that the element of joy in education is destroyed. On the contrary, it gives him far greater scope for self-expression in an atmosphere of freedom than either the home, where the parents are in most cases too busy to look to his needs, or an old style primary school is likely to do.

The co-ordinated development of a sense of responsibility, in its deeper meaning, is in no way inconsistent with a healthy childhood.

***Q. 2—Will not basic education revive child labour in an invidious form, thus exposing the children to exploitation by the State and denying them the free elementary education to which they are entitled according to the Directive Principles of State Policy?**

All work is not 'labour', and a child is not by nature averse to work. In fact, his active spirit craves for it and protests against learning by rote. Passive book learning is a form of intellectual activity which does not meet the requirements of child-nature. Normally, a child is happy when he is allowed to be doing something actively. It is only when work is forced that it becomes labour. When no force is applied, as in a good basic school, and when the other conditions of work are also satisfactory it is quite possible for work to acquire the characteristics of play and become a powerful medium of education.

The exploitation of craft work for educative purposes is a new idea in the field of education, and is therefore still subject to a number of misconceptions and unjustified fears. A basic school should never be like a factory where child labour is exploited. In the first instance, a good basic school takes particular care to see that children are not overworked; but even if an over zealous teacher should err in emphasising the productive aspect of basic education, there are several factors which would guard against such a tendency. Firstly, the constant check by supervisors, and secondly, the fact that the school is expected to show a satisfactory record of intellectual progress, will be effective safeguards

against the misuse of the educational principle of learning through craft. In this connection, it is reassuring to keep in mind the close relationship that is likely to develop between the basic school and the community, and it is reasonable to suppose that the members of the community will not be passive spectators should there be any evidence of exploitation.

According to the syllabus originally drawn up in the Wardha Scheme, three hours and twenty minutes in a working day of five and a half hours were suggested for craft work. This time was not devoted exclusively to manual work but also included periods concerned with the correlation of crafts to other subjects. Craft work in a good basic school is not all manual work but includes correlated and intellectual activity, too.

The expert basic school teacher maintains an imaginative correlation between purpose and activity, so that the value in material terms of the work done by the child or the articles produced by him is certainly not the most important part of the process of education. As Gandhiji said, the *takli*, for instance, is a perfect toy; it is no less a toy because it happens to be a productive one.

If the children return to the State a part of what they receive from it, it does not mean that they are being exploited. The partially self-supporting feature of basic education does not only enhance its educational value but also makes it easier to carry it further so that no child is denied the right of education. According to the scheme, the State provides land, school building, furniture, books, maps, tools, and other equipment, and participates in preparing the children for a new and juster social order which will be to their ultimate advantage.

***Q. 3—Does not a craft-centred education tend to neglect literacy and academic work?**

Literacy is often wrongly equated with education, while it is really *one* of the means to education. Even so, basic education does not neglect literacy. It only introduces it in such a manner that whatever is learnt is learnt actively and at first hand and ensures that there is no lapse into illiteracy. Literacy was certainly included in Gandhiji's scheme of education where ".....the hand will handle tools before it draws or traces the writing, the eyes will read the pictures of letters and words as they will know

other things in life, the ears will catch the names and meanings of things and sentences.... The children of my school will, therefore, read more quickly than they will write”.

If by academic work is meant the burdening of a child's memory with unrelated facts, basic education has little to do with it; but if academic work is understood in its true sense, there need be no cleavage between it and practical work. Craft in basic schools is not merely a mechanical practice, but involves oral work, expression work and drawing connected with it. Gandhiji said that with the disc of a *takli* he could teach a child everything about a circle without once mentioning the name of Euclid. Taking the instance of spinning, he showed how it could be correlated to mathematics, history, geography and economics, so that the latter could be taught in a much more stimulating manner than was otherwise the case. This is active learning. It is by arousing the child's natural interest in “the why and the wherefore of every process” that the imaginative basic school teacher develops the scientific attitude of mind and leads him to other subjects which can thus be taught when his mind is most receptive. Since the original scheme was formulated, good basic teachers have worked out schemes of correlated lessons in which craft and academic work are intelligently harmonised and do not hinder each other.

***Q. 4—How can subjects such as history, science, and mathematics be taught through correlation with a craft?**

Basic education cannot succeed without the application of the principle of correlation, which rests on the truth that craft is the natural meeting point of our physical and social environment. It is through craft that man transforms the raw materials of nature into useful objects for human society. The so-called subjects are branches of knowledge which man has acquired in the process of his gaining mastery over nature. Thus the teaching of history and geography through spinning is not as far fetched as it might seem at first. The knowledge of where cotton grows, its varieties, the evolution of human dress and the effect that historical changes have exerted on it, if related to spinning, will mean more to a child who is learning that craft than the bare facts taught by textbooks. If children learn to count their slivers, to measure the yarn they have spun, and to compare today's

output with yesterday's, they will learn the rudiments of arithmetic in a much more effective way than by counting coloured beads strung in a frame. Naturally, some crafts are more suitable for basic schools than others, and, therefore, those used as media of instruction are selected from the standpoint of their richness in educative possibilities.

The teaching of the mother tongue, for instance, can easily be correlated with a craft. In any language, the learner starts with words denoting things and actions, and in craft work almost the entire vocabulary has to do with things or processes. The sound and form of words are more important to a child if they stand for objects he is actually handling or for things he is doing.

Correlation is the natural way of knowing our environment. It arouses greater enthusiasm and interest, because by combining the process of learning with practical experience, education becomes significant for the child.

It should also be remembered that, besides craft, the basic system provides two other centres round which the principle of correlation can be worked, namely, the physical environment and the social environment.

The basic school teacher can easily develop his pupils' curiosity and powers of observation in regard to various natural phenomena such as rain, thunder, lightning, and the behaviour of heavenly bodies. It is easy to see how geography and science can be taught in correlation with these. The monuments and buildings that the child observes every day offer a ready medium for the teaching of local history.

The child's social environment includes various customs, celebrations and festivals. Teaching through a study of such social experiences is a special feature of the basic system and the imaginative teacher will find that the range of subjects which can be correlated with the social environment is almost unlimited.

As for subjects like poetry and aesthetics, it has not been claimed that they can be taught satisfactorily through craft; but the two other centres of correlation mentioned above can, with a little imagination, be utilised for developing in the child a sense for the beautiful. Besides, the system of basic education provides for the teaching of literature and it must be remembered that, though this system consists largely of correlation work, it

does not indiscriminately reject every other method of teaching, including formal 'lessons' where necessary.

***Q. 5—Assuming that the object of basic education is an integrated development of the child's personality, what means will the teacher have for determining the child's progress, his needs, and special aptitudes?**

As the child's eye and hand are trained, he also receives, directly or indirectly, a training in concentration, constructive and reproductive imagination, and power of judgement. In a system of education which aims at the total development of a child's faculties, his potential earning power will obviously not determine his response to the system. Nor will the old system of examinations help in assessing his progress.

The varied aspects of activity in basic schools will give the expert teacher ample opportunity for judging his pupils. By sharing the planning and execution of activity the children are expected to develop co-operative habits and receive elementary training in leadership. In the process of this education for life, the children are expected to acquire the capacity for self-reliance in every aspect of a clean, healthy and cultured life, together with an understanding of the social and moral implications of such a life.

The assessment of progress will naturally, therefore, have to be deeper and more imaginative than in those systems of education which have a literary bias. The teacher will take the personal record, notebooks, the power of planning, intellectual progress, dress, habits, artistic gifts and social environment into account in judging the child's progress. He will also take cognisance of regular attendance, aptitude to work, self-reliance and the development of the scientific attitude in the pupil and test him in the qualities of citizenship and the ideals of public service.

Ultimately, however, the only test is self-assessment in relation to practical life, and the right type of teacher will see to it that his pupils gradually become capable of it.

***Q. 6—Does not the emphasis on economic self-sufficiency clash with the educational interests of children whom it is intended to benefit?**

This feature of basic education has been the subject of con-

troversy ever since Gandhiji insisted upon it. He said that self-support was the acid test of its reality. By this he only meant that self-support would be a logical corollary of the fact that the pupil had learnt to use all his faculties properly. This concept of self-sufficiency embraces the idea of self-reliance not only in the economic but also in the social and moral sphere.

At the time basic education was first introduced, Gandhiji realised that, unless it was at least partially self-supporting, it would be impossible for a poor country like India to provide basic education on a mass scale. The Report of the Central Advisory Board of Education, which worked out the financial implications of universal basic education, shows that Gandhiji's apprehension had ample justification. Unless the country multiplied its wealth several times through rapid industrialisation, which Gandhiji did not favour, it would not have been possible to find the resources necessary for a programme of universal national education.

However, the Government of India did not adopt the Wardha Scheme as it stood, but generally accepted the recommendations of the Central Advisory Board of Education which laid far less emphasis on economic self-sufficiency.

In any case, the idea of self-support, far from jeopardising the educational interests of the pupils, instils in them a desirable sense of responsibility. An even more valid psychological reason for welcoming self-sufficiency is that it will make for thoroughness and efficiency in the work of pupil and teacher, and encourage the economic use of time and resources, besides being an effective safeguard against slipshod work, so that the articles produced in basic schools may be of sufficiently good quality to sell readily.

***Q. 7—Considering that the bulk of what is produced in basic schools cannot be sold, is not basic education wasteful and economically unsound?**

If basic education is examined from the point of view of its immediate financial implications, there is bound to be some waste at the beginning, but an experienced teacher can easily see to it that his pupils learn with as little waste as possible. It is true that the articles produced in basic schools will, like all craft articles, be relatively more expensive than machine-made articles,

but selling them should not be more difficult than selling other craft products which are being encouraged as a matter of national policy. In fact it is expected that many of the articles produced will be purchased at reasonable prices by teachers, children, and the local community.

It has been seen that it is possible to make up for the loss of the first two or three years in the next two or three years of the course. Cloth, which is produced in a large number of basic schools, has offered no marketing problem except for some very rough cloth woven at the initial stages. A number of School Boards have set an example by buying the school products for their own use, and attempts have been made in several States to produce articles according to specifications laid down by the State Governments.

Looked at from a broader point of view, basic education is not only not a waste but a means whereby waste can be avoided. Gandhiji said that "money spent on primary education is a waste of expenditure inasmuch as what little is taught is soon forgotten and has little or no value in terms of villages or cities". In the old system of education there is no scope for fruitful utilisation of the human material it trains, so that boys from rural areas, after receiving education, are lost to their village because what they learn is of very little use to them in life. They drift to the cities where they are more likely than not to become a social burden. Surely, it is a profitable investment for children to be educated in such a manner that while they are learning they are also increasing their productive capacity. Thus basic education is a safeguard against both waste of money and the even more tragic waste of human personality.

In any case, the scheme of basic education is primarily a scheme of education and not one of production. Thus to all thinking people such a question would appear largely irrelevant as far as the underlying principle is concerned. There are, of course, practical difficulties in financing any scheme of mass education, but those difficulties should not blind one to the fact that if India is to have a better crop of men and women, she must make a long term investment for the purpose.

***Q. 8—Does not the concept of basic education deny freedom of vocation and equality of opportunity by tying**

every child to the environment in which he happens to be born?

Any education which does not take the child's environment into consideration is bound to be lop-sided. Basic education does not tie the child to his environment; it merely uses that environment for the purpose of educating him, because it is only in relation to a background which is real to the child that he can learn effectively. One of the ultimate objectives of basic education is, in Gandhiji's words, "a juster social order in which there is no unnatural division between the 'haves' and 'have nots' and everybody is assured of a living wage and the right to freedom". Passive learning cannot instil in the child the same problem-consciousness as comes from learning by facing up to the actual personal problems of living inasmuch as they grow out of the child's individual and group reactions to the surrounding environment.

Children do not become spinners or weavers merely because they have learnt these crafts. The craft teaches them to be practical, it teaches them to use their fingers in co-ordination with the brain, so that they are better equipped for whatever profession they may choose to take up.

It is the existing system of education with its excessive emphasis on English and its narrow academic approach that has created a permanent cleavage between the highly educated few and the uneducated many. It has created a class of people who have come to look upon manual labour as undignified. Basic education has implicit within it the ideal of social justice, for it takes upon itself the function of overcoming prejudices which are inimical to society as a whole.

It is true that the scheme of basic education was first formulated primarily for rural areas. But when the Government of India adopted it, they did so with a view to introducing it in village and city schools alike. The underlying principle of basic education can be applied in city schools without any difficulty whatsoever. The provision of a craft is only incidental and does not mean that the child will be compelled later to take it up as a vocation if he does not so choose. Nor is there any reason why children from the cities should not benefit by basic education.

Basic education is not, in any sense, a class education but is

meant for all children of the nation without distinction. It has been called the "educational expression of a democratic social purpose", for through its insistence on the idea of social service and on manual work it strikes at the very root of special privilege.

***Q. 9—In the absence of a proper integration between basic education on the one hand and secondary and university education on the other, is it possible to introduce basic education on a mass scale without creating a serious hiatus in the educational system?**

Gandhiji did not look upon basic education only as a substitute for primary education but conceived it in terms of reconstructing the entire educational system. "I would revolutionise college education and relate it to national necessities", he said. Secondary education was to him an impediment as it compelled children to learn through a foreign language in seven years what they could learn more quickly in their mother tongue.

Besides the obvious disadvantage of secondary education, namely, that it had a narrow vocational purpose, it also created a bias against manual work and gave rise to the false notion that culture could be associated only with 'general' studies and not with practical subjects and productive activity. Obviously, a system of education which has failed to make any significant contribution to our national life must ultimately be replaced by one which is likely to prove more useful, whatever the practical difficulties.

That basic education was, in the first instance, limited to a particular age range only meant that the absence of adequate resources did not permit its simultaneous introduction at all levels. A start had to be made somewhere, and it was naturally made where the need for it was most pressing and where it was expected to show the best results. The problem of its integration with secondary education, however, was not ignored and, as early as 1939, the Central Advisory Board of Education appointed a committee to report on the co-ordination of basic with higher education. The committee recommended that basic education should comprise a course of eight years, of which the first five should cover the 'junior' stage, and the remaining three the 'senior' stage.

In 1952, the Government of India appointed a commission

to enquire into all aspects of Secondary Education in India, and one of its terms of reference was to suggest measures for the reorganisation and improvement of Secondary Education with particular reference to its relationship with basic and higher education. In order to obviate any clash with the basic school, the Commission recommended that the general layout and standard of syllabus in the senior basic, middle and lower secondary schools should be largely similar. The proposals of the Commission regarding the large number of Middle and Lower Secondary Schools aimed at bringing some of the important principles of basic education into the educational life of all children in the 11-14 age group. The Commission also recommended a new organisational structure for Secondary Education to follow primary or junior basic education, i.e. a middle (or junior secondary or senior basic) stage which should cover a period of 3 years; and a higher secondary stage which should cover the next four years.

The Commission took particular care to emphasise that there should be no abrupt break between the basic and the secondary schools. It was clearly postulated that the latter should no longer be 'single track' institutions as they had heretofore been, but should offer a diversity of educational programmes calculated to meet the varying aptitudes, interests and talents of pupils leaving basic schools. Both general and vocational subjects should be provided and the pupils should have the freedom to choose from them according to their needs. The Commission also recommended that craft should form a compulsory part of secondary education, not merely in order to ensure a smooth transition from the basic to the secondary stage but also because education, at any level, was considered incomplete without practical work.

This diversification of courses and the increased emphasis on practical and technical training will go a long way in bridging the gap between basic and secondary education because practical and intellectual skills will be developed together.

***Q. 10—In view of the acute shortage of trained basic school teachers, is it practicable to switch over from primary to basic education on a mass scale?**

It is true that the trained staff needed for a mass switchover

is not available at present, but such difficulties attend every new venture and should not be mistaken for permanent obstacles. It has been pointed out that matriculates who have difficulty in finding employment can easily teach in basic schools, provided they have the willingness to learn the techniques of basic teaching, and have the eagerness to make themselves useful in the task of national regeneration.

The Government is aware that the success of basic education depends to a larger extent than that of any other educational system on the special qualifications of the teacher. Attempts are being made, therefore, to overcome this shortage and Government grants are being given to Jamia Millia, Delhi, and to Vinay Bhavan, Santiniketan, since 1946-47 to provide training to basic school teachers. The duration of the training course at both these institutions is one year, and training is given in educational theory, practical teaching, and crafts.

The First Five Year Plan also provides for the establishment of a post-graduate training college, a basic training school, and a senior basic school for practical demonstration in a selected area in each State and many States have already established these institutions. The recently formulated plans for the expansion of basic education, too, provide for the training of career masters, craft teachers, and basic school teachers. The existing teachers' training schools are being converted into basic ones and new training colleges are being opened.

In addition to this, the States have their own programmes for the training of basic school teachers.

***Q. 11—Is not the scheme of basic education reactionary in that it tends to arrest the country's industrial development by keeping it at the cottage craft level?**

An over-populated and under-developed country like India is, in any case, bound to have a large sector of small-scale industry in order to make the best use of its limited capital resources and at the same time create maximum opportunities for employment. Basic education, by giving the pupil a craft-bias makes him familiar with the techniques and problems of small industry where there is a reasonable chance of his being ultimately employed. It is only a poor economist, and certainly a superficial one, who can conceive of a modernised India without

small-scale and cottage industries. Basic education will consequently not only fit in with the kind of economic set-up which is desirable for India, but also help considerably in bringing it about.

Even without discussing the respective merits of industrialisation and rural economy, one can safely assert that education imparted through practical and manual work is much more likely to produce efficient and skilled workers than one which is predominantly bookish. This is indirectly borne out by the fact that educational movements, like the Project Method and the Activity School, which have developed in highly industrialised countries like America, Soviet Russia and the United Kingdom, have also recognised the importance of practical and productive work in education.

Basic education is craft-centred and the use of craft, as a medium of instruction, has been found to be essentially a sound educational principle. Well co-ordinated training in the use of the hand and the mind, in practical skill, observation and creative work will certainly be a better preparation even for later industrial training than passive education with a literary bias which only succeeds in prejudicing most students against manual work.

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