

ALL-INDIA NATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE, AT WARDHA

Mahatma Gandhi's Inaugural Address.

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The ideas that I wish to place before you to-day are new in their method of presentation at least to me, although my experience behind those ideas is very old. The propositions that I wish to put forward refer to both the primary and college education. But we will have to give special consideration to primary education. I have included secondary in primary education because primary education is the only education so-called that is available to a very small fraction of the people in our villages, many of which I have seen during my peregrinations since 1915. I have seen perhaps more than anybody else, the conditions of the Indian villages. I gained good experience of the rural life of South Africa as well. I know fully well the type of education that is given in the Indian villages. And now that I have settled down in Segaon I can study the whole problem of national education from closer quarters.

I am convinced that if we wish to ameliorate the rural conditions we must combine the secondary with primary education. The educational scheme, therefore, that we wish to place before the country must be primarily for the villages. I have no experience of college education, though I have come in contact with hundreds of college boys, have had heart to heart chats and correspondence with them, know their needs, failings and the diseases they suffer from. But we must restrict ourselves to a consideration of primary education. For, the moment the primary question is solved the secondary one of college education will be solved easily.

I am convinced that the present system of primary education is not only wasteful but positively harmful. Most of the boys are lost to the parents and to the occupation to which they are born. They pick up evil habits, affect urban ways and get a smattering of something which may be anything but education. What then should be the form of primary education? I think the remedy lies in educating them by means of vocational or manual training. I have some experience of it myself, having trained my own sons and other children on the Tolstoy Farm in South Africa through some manual training, e.g. carpentry or shoe-making which I learned from Kallenbach who had his training in a Trappist Monastery. My sons and all children, I am confident, have lost nothing, though I could not give them an education that either satisfied him or them, as the time at his disposal was limited and his preoccupations were numerous.

Education through Handicraft

But the scheme that I wish to place before you to-day is not the teaching of some handicrafts side by side with so-called liberal education. I want that the whole education should be imparted through some handicraft or industry. It might be objected that in the middle ages only handicrafts were taught to the students; but the occupational training, then, was far from serving an educational purpose. The crafts were taught only for the sake of the crafts, without any attempt to develop the intellect as well. In this age those borne to certain professions had forgotten them, had taken to clerical careers and were lost to the countryside. As a result, it is now impossible to find an efficient carpenter or smith in an average village. The handicrafts were nearly lost and the spinning wheel, being neglected, was taken to Lancashire where it was developed, thanks to the English genius, to an extent that is seen to-day. This, I say, irrespective of my views on Industrialism.

The remedy lies in imparting the whole art and science of a craft through practical training and there through imparting the whole education. Teaching of Takli-spinning for instance, presupposes imparting of knowledge of various varieties of cotton, different soils in different provinces of India, the history of the ruin of the handicraft, its political reasons which will include the history of the British Rule in India, knowledge of Arithmetic and so on, I am trying the same experiment on my little grandson who scarcely feels that he is being taught, for he all the while plays and laughs and sings. I am especially mentioning the Takli and emphasising its utility because I have realised its power and its romance; also because the handicraft of making cloth is the only one which can be taught throughout the country, and because the Takli is very cheap. If you have any other suitable handicraft to suggest, please do so without any hesitation so that we might consider it as well. But I am convinced that Takli is the only practical solution of our problem, considering the deplorable economic conditions prevailing in the country. The constructive programme of Khadi since 1920 has led to the formation of Congress Ministries in seven provinces, and their success also would depend on the extent to which we carry it out.

I have placed the scheme before the ministers; it is for them to accept it or to reject it. But my advice is that the primary education should centre round the Takli. During the first year everything should be taught through Takli; in the second year other processes also can be taught side by side. It will also be possible to earn quite enough through the Takli because there will be sufficient demand for the cloth produced by the children. Even the parents of the children will be sufficient to consume the products of their children. I have contemplated a Seven Years' Course which so far as Takli is concerned would culminate in practical knowledge of weaving, including dyeing designing, etc.

Profit-Yielding

I am very keen on finding the expenses of a teacher through the product of the manual work of his pupils because I am convinced that there is no other way to carry education to scores of our children. We cannot wait until we have the necessary revenue and until the Viceroy reduces the military expenditure. You should bear in mind that this primary education would include the elementary principles of sanitation, hygiene, nutrition, of doing their own work, helping parents at home, etc. The present generation of boys know no cleanliness, no self-help, and are physically weak. I would, therefore, give compulsory physical training through musical drill.

I have been accused of being opposed to literary training. Far from it! I simply want to show the way in which it should be given. The self-supporting aspect has also been attacked. It is said, whereas we should be expending millions on primary education we are going to exploit the children. It is also feared that there would be enormous waste. This fear is also falsified by experience. As for exploiting or burdening the children, I would ask whether it was burdening the child to save him from a disaster? Takli is a good enough toy to play with. It is no less a toy because it is a productive one. Even to-day children help their parents to a certain extent. The Segaon children know the details of Agriculture better than I, for having worked with their parents on the fields. Whilst the child will be encouraged to spin and help his parents with agricultural jobs, he will also be made to feel that he does not belong only to his parents but also to the village and to the country, and that he must make some return to them. That is the only way. I would tell the ministers that they will make children helpless by doling out education to them. They would make them self-confident and brave by their paying for their own education by their own labour. This system is to be common to all Hindus, Muslims, Parsees and Christians. Why do I not lay any stress on religious instruction? People ask. Because I am teaching them practical religion, the religion of self-help.

The state is bound to find employment if needed, for all the pupils thus trained. As for teachers, Prof. Shah has suggested the method of Conscription. He has demonstrated its value by citing instances for Italy and other lands.

If Mussolini could impress the youth of Italy for the service of his country, why should not we? Was it fair to label as slavery the compulsory enlistment of service of our youth for a year or longer before they began their career? The youths had contributed a lot to the success of the movement for freedom during the past 17 years, and the speaker would call upon them to freely give a year of their lives to the service of the nation. Legislation, if it was necessary in this respect, would not be compulsion, as it could not be passed without the consent of the majority of our representatives.

I would, therefore, ask them to say whether this imparting of education through manual training appealed to them. For him to make it self-supporting would be a test of its efficiency. The children ought at the end of seven years to be able to pay for their instruction and be earning units. College education was largely an urban proposition. He would not say that it was an unmitigated failure, as primary education was, but the results were fairly disappointing. Why should any one of the graduates have to be unemployed? Takli I had proposed as a concrete instance because Vinoba had the largest amount of practical experience in it, and he was there to answer their objections, if any. Kakasaheb would also be able to tell them something; though his experience was more theoretical than practical. He had especially drawn my attention to Armstrong's "Education for Life," especially the chapter on "Education of the Hand." The late Madhusudan Das was a lawyer, but he was convinced that without the use of our hands and feet our brains would be atrophied, and even if it worked it would be the home of Satan. Tolstoy had taught the same lesson through many of his tales.